A Summer-Fiction Double Issue

$4.95
[IN CANADA: $6.25]

THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW

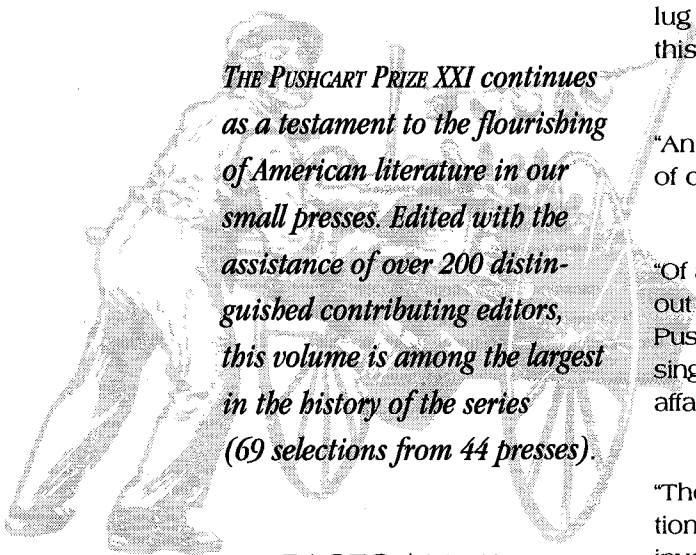
MAY/JUNE & JULY/AUGUST 1997
VOL. 282, NOs. 3 & 4

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE MOST HONORED LITERARY SERIES IN AMERICA
BEGINS ITS THIRD DECADE WITH ONE OF THE LARGEST SELECTIONS IN ITS HISTORY

THE 1997 PUSHCART PRIZE XXI
BEST OF THE SMALL PRESSES

Edited by Bill Henderson with the Pushcart Prize editors



THE PUSHCART PRIZE XXI continues as a testament to the flourishing of American literature in our small presses. Edited with the assistance of over 200 distinguished contributing editors, this volume is among the largest in the history of the series (69 selections from 44 presses).

625 PAGES $29.50
HARDBOUND

PUSHCART PRESS
P.O. Box 380
Wainscott, N.Y. 11975

"... a truly remarkable collection of the finest small press poems, essays, and short fiction."
BOOKLIST

"A surprising, vital collection that should hearten all serious readers."
KIRKUS REVIEWS

"A fascinating peek at the vast and largely hidden world of non-commercial publishing."
TIME

"There is nothing else quite like this labor of love... long may it appear."
CHOICE

"Indispensable... Get it, read it, lug it around with you; as always this book is essential."
LIBRARY JOURNAL

"An exceptionally strong sampling of contemporary writers."
NEW REPUBLIC

"Of all the anthologies that come out each year, the one from the Pushcart Press is perhaps the single best measure of the state of affairs in American literature today."
THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

"There may be no better combination of overview, entertainment, invention and play each year than the Pushcart collections."
WORLD LITERATURE TODAY

"Of all the anthologies, Pushcart's is the most rewarding."
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Call for entries

The North American Review
Fourth Biennial
Cover Competition

How to Enter
Do not submit the original work. Send a 35mm slide transparency, clearly marked with the artist's name, mailing address, and phone number. Indicate front and top of work. Please enclose an entry blank (photocopy O.K.) and, if you want the slide returned, a self-addressed stamped envelope. Send all entries to:

Cover Contest
The North American Review
University of Northern Iowa
Cedar Falls IA 50614-0516

Deadline
All entries must be postmarked no later than 1 November 1997.

Competition

Graphic designers, illustrators, printmakers, and other visual artists (professionals and students) are invited to compete in the illustration or design of the cover of The North American Review. The winning entry will be used as the cover of the March/April 1998 issue of the magazine.

Guidelines

Entries may be carried out in any medium or combination of media, in any colors with the exception of metallic or fluorescent pigments. (No photographs, please.) Entries must be the proportion of the cover of the *NAR* (8 1/8 inches wide by 10 7/8 inches high). To facilitate color separation, the original artwork should measure no wider than 19 inches and no higher than 25. All entries must anticipate the contrast required for the superimposition of the magazine logo across the top portion of the illustration.

All styles of illustration, design and fine arts are welcomed and encouraged. All entries must be the original work of the person who enters the competition. Each person may submit only one entry.

Fees and Awards

There are no entry fees. The winner of the competition will receive a check for $300, published credit, a one-year subscription to the *NAR* and 50 tear sheets of the finished cover.

Judging
Final judge for the competition will be Gary Kelley, internationally-known illustrator and cover art director of the *NAR*.

NAR Cover Competition Entry Blank
Please type or print clearly

Name of Artist _____

Address _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Phone ( ) _____ Med _____ Original size _____

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

The phrase "baker's dozen" seldom appears in a literary context, but we offer it here to introduce the thirteen stories, long, short, and in between, that are the feast of this special (and we hope annual) double number of the NAR.

Short fiction and *The North American Review* have maintained a long and illustrious partnership through the years, and the palpable fruits of that liaison include a pair of National Magazine Awards, regular appearances in *Best American Short Stories* and the annual O. Henry and Pushcart Prize anthologies, and the public successes of writers whose early appearances here have led to letters from agents, acceptances from publishers, and honors from the critical world. If we sound proud, we are. If we seem to be sounding a conclusion, we are assuredly not. Your editor has sat in this chair for 28 years, and our pleasure in reading a good story—especially when the writer is an unknown—has not flagged and, the fiction muse permitting, never will.

This issue's menu, of course, contains more than a few garnishes to accompany the fiction main course: a tasty sorbet of poetry, a thoughtful dessert of the essay, including a new department, *Virtual View*, catering to the computer-literati among our readers. Bring your own wine; the corkage fee is waived.

A CAUTIONARY NOTE to Constant Reader and to our hundreds of serials librarians: this is a "double issue" covering the months of May through August, a means by which lovers of fiction may satisfy their appetites through the idle summer months. This means there will be no July/August number as such; the next issue of the NAR will appear in September.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW

FOUNDED IN 1815 VOLUME 282, NOs. 3 & 4 MAY/AUGUST 1997

EDITOR
Robley Wilson

POETRY
Peter Cooley

ART
Gary Kelley
Osie L. Johnson, Jr.

ENVIRONMENT
Terry Tempest Williams

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS
Margaret Atwood, Susan Bergman, Robert Dana, Perry Glasser, Margaret Morganroth Gullette, David Hellerstein, Leo J. Hertzel, Robert L. King, Barry Lopez, Michael Martone, Stephen Minot, Mary Peterson, Barry Sanders, Scott Russell Sanders, Natalia Rachel Singer, Lawrence Sturhahn, Gloria Vando, Eric Zencey

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT
Paul Plisiewicz

BUSINESS MANAGER
Charlotte L. Wilson

EDITORIAL & BUSINESS OFFICES:
University of Northern Iowa
Cedar Falls, Iowa 50614-0516

RATES
$4.95 a copy; $22.00 a year in the U.S. and its possessions, $29.00 a year in Canada, $32.00 in all other countries

CREDITS:
Cover: *Michael Morshuk*

Illustrations & drawings: *William Francis Bisbee, Manuel Macias, Benjamin Sigmund, James Michael Dorsey, Osie L. Johnson, Jr., Chad Hunter, Casey Slack, Adam Hansel, Lee Nyquist, Gary Kelley, M. Kasper*

SUMMER FICTION FEATURE

14 Salt Lake, *by Liza Wieland*
26 The Grant, *by Dallas Wiebe*
29 The Ladies of West Rarington Falls Get Down, *by Michael Fedo*
32 My Psychologist, My Psychiatrist, *by Fred G. Leebron*
34 White Butterflies, *by C. L. Rawlins*
40 Passages, *by Hilary Masters*
44 Stepping Off, *by Jeff Minerd*
49 The Way You See It, *by Sherrie Flick*
50 Two Disquisitions on 'Concepts', *by Mark Halliday*
52 A Man of Steel, *by William Penrod*
56 A Line Is a Series of Points, *by Ken Kalfus*
60 The Ghost in the Garden, *by Ann Townsend*
68 Hawks, *by John Lowry*

POETRY

48 Visiting Hour, *by Floyd Skloot*
53 Thinking About Sex, *by Robert Thomas*
54 Hit and Run, *by Stephen Perry*
59 Outside the Russian-Turkish Baths, *by Matthea Harvey*
66 What I Feel Like at the Office, *by Michael Kopacz*
71 A Death, *by William Virgil Davis*

DEPARTMENTS

4 Familiar Matters: ANGELS, *by Robert Newton*
7 Natural Orders: THIS FAR, *by Linda K. Kinkel*
10 American Eye: TRAVELS WITH MYRON, *by Richard Terrill*
72 Books & Authors: LETTERS FROM THE 'THIRTIES, *by Naton Leslie*
76 Virtual View: VISIGOTHS AT THE GATES, *by Perry Glasser*

THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW [ISSN 0029-2397], May/June & July/August 1997, Vol 282, Nos. 3 & 4. Published bimonthly, in January, March, May (a double issue), September & November by the University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, Iowa 50614-0516. Annual subscription rates $22.00 in the United States and its possessions, $29.00 in Canada, $32.00 in all other countries. Periodical postage paid at Cedar Falls, Iowa 50614-9998.

Copyright © 1997 by the University of Northern Iowa.

Phone/FAX: (319) 273-6455; E-mail: NAR@UNI.EDU; Internet: http://www.cais.net/aesir/NAR/.

All rights, including translation into other languages, reserved. No part of this periodical may be reproduced in any form without the express written permission of THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW. Opinions expressed by contributors do not necessarily reflect those of the editors or of the University of Northern Iowa.

Unsolicited manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by self-addressed envelope with sufficient postage affixed. *Fiction manuscripts are read only between January 1 and April 1 annually.* Claims for subscriber copies not received must be made within six weeks of date of publication. POSTMASTER: Send change of address to *The North American Review*, University of Northern Iowa, 1222 W. 27th St., Cedar Falls, Iowa 50614-0516. THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW is indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature, the Humanities Index (including a full-text electronic version), Index to Little Magazines, Index of American Periodical Verse, the Book Review Index, the American Humanities Index, and others. Member of the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses (CLMP). Article reprints and back file volumes in microform are available from University Microfilms International, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106 or 18 Bedford Row, London WCIR 4EJ. U.S. and Canadian newsstand distribution by Eastern News Distributors, Inc., One Media Way, 12406 Route 250, Milan OH 44846-9705. PRINTED IN USA.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Angels

ROBERT NEWTON

Truly to be clad in feathers
is the very best of things.
—Aristophanes, *Birds*

1. The Religion Class

WHEN I ARRIVED for my religion class one Monday morning there was an angel in the corner. She was in the last chair in the far row, her wings neatly folded, her eyes closed. Then she opened her eyes and looked up at me and she was so beautiful I dropped my lecture notes and they fluttered to the floor at my feet. No matter. I knew what to do. We would speak of other things.

My students arrived, took their places, snapped open their laptop computers, typed who-knows-what into those machines, and did not notice the angel at all.

"Today," I said to them, "you will hear my Lecture on the Angels."

The angel smiled at me.

"Just a moment," my students said. "There is nothing in the syllabus about a Lecture on the Angels. According to the syllabus we are to have a Lecture on Disenchantment in Post-Modern Theology."

The angel fluffed her feathers a little.

"Forget that Pagan syllabus," I said.

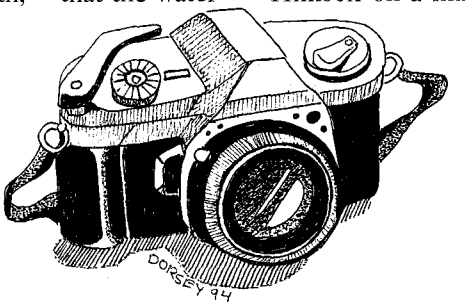
And I began my lecture, and my students began to tap their computers, eep, eep, eep, and the angel gazed up at me with her blue eyes.

"To begin with," I said, "angels were of course immortal."

2. What Angels Do

THERE WERE GUARDIAN angels (I said to my religion class) who came down from Heaven to watch over children, and over nations. There were angels of punishment, dressed in black. There were angels of prayer, angels of repentance, angels of death, archangels. Angels were the princes and ministers at the Court of Heaven, and they were the soldiers in the Army of God. Ten thousand myriads of angels, it was said, accompanied God wherever He went. When Moses received the Law, twenty thousand ministering angels descended to Mount Sinai. By one calculation there were exactly 301,306,722 angels in Heaven.

The cherubim, according to the Hebrews, guarded the Throne of God and the Garden of Eden. Certain angels, according to the *Apocalypse of Paul*, traveled to Earth every day to watch humanity, and at sunset traveled back to Heaven to report to God all they had seen. Angels, according to Origen in *Contra Celsum*, watched over the environment. They made certain "that the ground brings forth," "that the water springs forth in fountains, and refreshes the earth with running streams," and "that the air is kept pure."



Angels made the world, Menander said. Angels lived on the Sun, according to Theodotus. Angels at the four corners of the world, according to the *Revelation to John*, held back the four winds. Some said that angels threw the meteors that crossed the sky at night. According to the *Questions of Bartholomew* there were angels of lightning and thunder, "And there is another angel over the sea which makes it rough with waves." According to the Ethiopic *Enoch* there were angels of the frost, snow, hail and dew. According to the Slavonic *Enoch* two hundred angels ruled the stars, a hundred and fifty thousand attended the sun by day, a thousand by night, and every morning "a hundred angels kindle the sun and set it on fire."

But the most important job the angels had to do, so it was said, was to bring news from Heaven.

And for a very long time there was no news from Heaven.

3. News from Heaven

THERE WERE OF COURSE several ways that news from Heaven might arrive. A fiery finger, for example, might write a message in mid-air, or an invisible hand might write a glowing message on a wall. A disembodied voice might speak from the sky: a god was shouting. The Flagellants said they received a heavenly letter inscribed by God Himself on a marble tablet—it said that He was through with mercy, unless we scourged ourselves. The Babylonians thought the stars in the night sky, since the gods arranged them there, revealed the future. And it was said that messages from the gods might be discerned in cloud formations, or in the flights of birds, or in the entrails of sacrificed animals.

The world needed news from Heaven because the gods, who once lived here with us in the Golden Age, fled the Earth and went to live in the fastness of Heaven, in the region above the Moon. So every-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

one wanted to know: Will the gods return? If so, when? Would they send a messiah in the meanwhile? Would the Earth endure, or end? And might we expect, after this life, another?

But there were certain difficulties in receiving news from Heaven. Messages written by fiery fingers did not last. The stars seemed unreliable. Cloud formations came and went. Reading entrails required no end of patience.

Clearly the best way to receive news from Heaven was for an angel to deliver it.

So the world waited for an angel to arrive from Heaven on enormous wings, bringing news.

4. The Dead Are Only Sleeping

AND AT LAST AN ANGEL did arrive, according to the Christians. It descended to Palestine to announce that Heaven in its mercy had sent the world a messiah to sort things out. The messiah had arrived but was killed, the Christians said. Fortunately He had been resurrected, and managed to return to Heaven, and one day despite His misadventure He would attempt a Second Coming.

That Second Coming, the Christians continued, would be announced by the angel Gabriel with a trumpet-blast the whole world would hear. Then the messiah would return. The dead would be raised from the ground, judged by God, then punished or rewarded. And all the Forces of Evil would be overthrown.

These mighty events—the Last Trump, the Second Coming, the General Resurrection, the Day of Judgment and the Apocalypse—would happen soon, the Christians said, and meanwhile the dead were only sleeping, as it were.

That was good news but then the Pagans began to persecute the Christians and, out of spite, knowing what Christians believed, they beheaded Christian martyrs.

It made no difference, the Christians said. The martyrs would be restored on Judgment Day and resurrected.

Then the Pagans sent Christian martyrs to the lions in the arena.

It made no difference, the Christians said. The martyrs would be repaired on Judgment Day and resurrected.

In Palestine the Roman governor ordered the bodies of Christians left unburied on the plains for scavengers to devour.

It made no difference, the Christians said. They would be reassembled on Judgment Day and resurrected.

During the rule of Galerius, Christians were burned at the stake and their charred bones were gathered and ground into bone-powder and then the bone-powder was thrown into the sea for the fish.

The Christians could not stand it.

The martyrs, the Christians announced, did not need their old bodies. Why should they be resurrected? *They were already in Heaven.* Their souls left their poor bodies at the moment of death. These disembodied souls rose through the air, traveled past the Moon, arrived in Heaven, and were instantly rewarded for their suffering.

Meanwhile the rest of the dead were sleeping, as it were.

Just a moment, others said. If the souls of Christian martyrs truly left their bodies at the moment of death and went straight to Heaven, was it right that the souls of Christian saints were still imprisoned here below?

No, it was not.

For that matter, did the souls of pious monks, after lives of the most appalling self-denial, have to lurk in tombs until the Day of Judgment?

That could not be.

And if the souls of martyrs rose instantly to Heaven, did the souls of virgins have to wait in dirty graves?

It was insupportable.

So it was decided that the souls of martyrs, saints, monks, virgins and all respectable Christians left their bodies and went to Heaven, while the wicked were only sleeping, as it were.

Just a moment, others said. If the souls of the virtuous went immedi-

Choice Magazine Listening

a free audio cassette magazine for people unable to read standard print

Do you know someone who misses the joy of reading because of loss of vision or other handicap?

If so, why not tell that person about **CHOICE MAGAZINE LISTENING?** This free service provides 8 hours of audio tapes every other month with unabridged selections from over 100 publications such as the *New Yorker, Smithsonian, Atlantic, North American Review* and *Scientific American.*

CML subscribers have been reading the world's best minds for 30 years in selections by writers such as Saul Bellow, John McPhee, Annie Dillard, Grace Paley, Russell Banks, William Styron, Seamus Heaney and Garrison Keillor.

The special 4-track cassette player is provided free, on permanent loan, by the Library of Congress. For information: CML, Dept NA, 85 Channel Drive, Port Washington, NY 11050. Or call 516-883-8280.

CHOICE

MAGAZINE LISTENING

A TALKING MAGAZINE

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ately to Heaven, and were rewarded for their virtue, why should the souls of the wicked be allowed to loaf in their tombs until the Second Coming? Surely the souls of the wicked, at the moment of death, were immediately dragged into the Underworld and boiled for their wickedness.

Thus it seemed, upon reflection, that the souls of both the virtuous and the wicked went at death to Heaven or to Hell for their afterlives, and the dead were not sleeping after all.

But there was a certain difficulty with this idea. The difficulty was: how could souls be punished or rewarded? Souls, after all, were invisible, intangible, ineffable, insubstantial.

Souls, in short, were nothing.

5. Souls

SOULS MUST BE *something*, Tertullian said. If souls were *nothing*, what was the point of afterlives?

Fortunately, all the philosophers in the world had been at work upon this problem for several centuries.

A soul, Hippon announced, was actually a liquid. Souls passed from fathers to their children in semen; semen was wet; therefore, souls are liquid. Souls are no doubt a liquid, Critias agreed, but what liquid filled the body? Surely souls were made of blood.

Piffle, Diogenes said. Souls are made of air. But souls, Democritus insisted, were made of fiery atoms. The soul, said Epicurus, "is a corporeal thing," composed "of the smoothest and roundest of atoms," and "most nearly resembling wind with an admixture of heat."

The soul is situated in the brain, Hippon announced. Not so, Epicurus said. Surely the soul is spread throughout the body of its host. No, Chrysippus said, the soul is actually in the heart though, true, bits of it traveled in the semen.

We are not the only ones with souls, Anaxagoras revealed. All living creatures, no matter how wretched or low, were equipped with souls. Magnets, Thales announced, also have souls, which explained how magnets moved iron.

The air was full of souls, the Pythagoreans announced. In fact the motes of dust in sunbeams were no doubt many little souls hurrying this way and that, as anyone could see by observing sunbeams and dust-motes. The air is truly full of souls, Plato said, and they are like little chariots with little horses, galloping through the aether, but invisibly.

All of this was very useful but the problem was not really solved, because souls removed from bodies were still no more than wind or dust-motes or puddles of one thing or another. So every theologian in Christendom set to work upon the problem.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ancient writers, available in a variety of editions and in translation:

Aristotle, *On the Soul.*
Origen, *De Principiis.*
Tertullian, *De Anima.*

Modern writers:

Edwyn Bevan, *Sibyls and Seers: A Survey of Some Ancient Theories of Revelation and Inspiration* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1928).

Gustav Davidson, *A Dictionary of Angels* (New York: Macmillan, 1967). J.K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

Souls were certainly round, it was announced. The sphere was the perfect form. If souls were not formless, they had perfect forms. Therefore, souls were round.

No, Irenaeus said. That must be wrong. Souls arriving in Heaven or in Hell must possess the semblance of human form because, if they did not, who could tell one from another?

Yes, Tertullian said, souls did have human forms because, like water freezing in a bowl, they took the form of their containers. Moreover, according to a reliable Montanist vision, souls were "soft and transparent" and had the same color as the sky. That is to say, souls were blue.

But all the ideas of the philosophers and theologians had not helped. The real problem was that nobody wanted to be a soul. Who wanted to die and arrive in Heaven and be nothing but a dust-mote or a dab of semen? Who wanted to reach the Realms of Bliss at last and be round and blue? For this problem there was no solution.

Except one.

Who was strolling across the fleecy clouds and down the Streets of Gold?

Who thronged about the Throne of God?

Who sang in the heavenly Choir?

Angels, that was who.

And when we, after death, arrived in Heaven, would we not stroll across the clouds, stand at the Throne of God, and sing? Surely we would. That was our destiny. It was God's Plan. Why was Heaven full of angels anyway? Mortals at the moment of death became angels. In other words, we were the angels.

And angels were dead folks with wings.

6. Lecture's End

THE ANGEL IN THE CORNER began to sob. Angel-sized tears fell from her blue eyes and soaked everything. Her feathers became bedraggled. Her gown was ruined.

My students turned and saw her and immediately began to weep into their computers which went eeeeeeeeep and died and went dark.

"Of course," I said, trying to continue, "since none of the dead were sleeping, as it were, and since everybody's soul left right away, there was at least no more need for a Last Trump, a Second Coming, a General Resurrection, a Judgment Day, or a big Apocalypse."

But they all grieved so loudly I decided to end my lecture or we would drown in tears, and I went and opened the window and the angel flew off toward the Sun. □

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

This Far

LINDA K. KINKEL

MY HANDS GRIP the sides of the dugout as if a tight hold can ensure safe passage. I squat in an unsteady equilibrium, near the bow of a long, crude canoe, buttocks resting on my heels. Behind me are three other American passengers, and a Quechuan helmsman. In front of me is a second Quechuan; each of the Peruvians has a wooden paddle and pole. Their job is to guide us across the Rio Madre de Dios. Our clearance is two inches. We are overloaded.

Staying in the shallows, and using their poles, the river men move us slowly upstream, against the current. Then, judging the water with some instinct born of time and experience, they turn the dugout to face the river broadside, and push us out into its current. We waver with the water, gain a quiet balance, and move out, swiftly. The Quechuans paddle furiously and smoothly. Between the force of the river and the force of their paddles, we cut a diagonal path toward the opposite shore.

My god what am I doing here? I think. What have I gotten myself into this time? If our precarious equilibrium is upset in the middle of this Mississippi-wide, tropical river, what will be our fates? Piranha-eaten? Panic-drowned? Or whisked downstream to unknown depths of unfamiliar territories, dark and secret and therefore frightening territories?

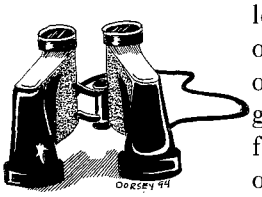
In moments we gracefully hit the shore. I put one uncertain boot onto the mud, then the other, touch the slippery but firm land, and say, *Holy shit*, with feeling. Everyone laughs heartily.

I smile openly. I've made it. This far.

WE HAVE A THREE-KILOMETER hike to make through lowland shrub forest, along a trail so narrow it can barely accommodate one human foot in front of the other. Our destination is the Hacienda Amazonia, a large and simple building constructed and named by some visionary who dreamed of a resort in the middle of the Amazon. The Hacienda is the ultimate in simplicity: one large square room follows another and each opens onto the front porch with a single door. The whole is elevated on stilts, an incongruity now, in the dry season, when chickens lay their eggs beneath the building.

But this, the Hacienda, is only our temporary destination. It is the hills where we want to be—the slopes that are shrouded in clouds each morning, the mountains between which flocks of red and green parrots raucously reel, the luxuriantly, deeply green and black forest—that is our goal.

Our plan is to stay at the Hacienda as our Peruvian assistant, Jesus, prepares a camp site above. With machete and Swiss army knife, five-foot, broad-faced and broad-shouldered Jesus clears paths and a patch of forest. He builds tables and benches, and cuts sturdy poles for two enormous tarps that form the ceiling of the communal heart of camp.



While Jesus chops and carves and whittles atop a mountain, we begin our work. We are a scientific expedition, ornithologists all, here to study the birds of a little piece of the Amazon. Some are experienced tropical voyagers. Not me. I am uninitiated, new, inexperienced. Terrified.

Back home, in Illinois, my fear was intellectual. But here it is visceral. I am filled with doubts and dreads about big things, about small things. I don't know which shoes to wear, which pants, what shirt. What happens if I lose my knife, or find a fer-de-lance? Will I have enough iodine to disinfect my water? Can I really do this? All I know is I must try. "Fear is a murderer in the guise of a security guard," I wrote many years ago. I must try.

TWO WEEKS PASS and we move up the mountain, into the heart of it—the rainforest. The lushness of green in its many and varied forms surrounds us—green of window-sized leaves, green of sinewy symmetry, elaborately composed green and utterly formless green. Water drips insistently through overhead mazes of glossy leaves, following tangled lianas, streaming past bromeliads and orchids.

Flickers of light reach ground level here by bouncing from leaf to leaf, from green to green, on their way through layers of canopy. Only shadowy glimmers touch the forest floor—the dim illumination of the rainforest.

Sounds define this place more than sights. The physical tapestry is too dense to allow much penetration by feeble human vision. You cannot see treetops, only tree bottoms. You cannot see birds that coo or screech or wolf-whistle; you only hear them. Your heart pounds as a mammal thunders through the brush, unseen. You listen to a chorus of frogs that seem to say "come on and hear, come on and hear ..." never getting to "Alexander's ragtime band." Of course, you never see them.

I decide to study Red-capped

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Manakins, *Pipra chloromeros*, magical little birds that I'd only known from museums before now. To study them I must see them. To see them I must cut trails to their singing grounds, known as leks. Thus, I learn to use a machete adequately, though not expertly, hacking paths through the rainforest.

Like many rainforest creatures, Red-capped Manakins are so dazzling that a mere name constrains them. If they must be labeled, I suggest: Shimmering Red-Crowned, Velvety-Black-Bodied, Bright Yellow-Thighed Magical Manakins, with Eyes of Purest White.

The manakins fascinate and anchor me. I watch them for hour upon hour, describing their calls (sliding "schwees" and nasal "chebeeks," trills and honks), counting songs and birds and wing flicks and so on. I ascribe names and codes to their behaviors: about-face hop, sideways slide, wing quiver. Around me and above me, the manakins perform. I am superfluous to them. At times they are everything to me. With the manakins, I have at least the illusion of a safe place, a familiar place, something known. I stand on a patch of ground in the rainforest where the leaf litter is compressed, with notebook and binoculars, watching manakins dance. For a time, I know only the wonder that lies beyond fear.

A MONTH PASSES and I learn more things. I can wash my hair with a quart of water. I know not to leave damp clothes on the line for long—they become alive with hatching insect eggs—maggots crawl under belt loops and into pockets. I've learned that any marvelous living creature is subject to becoming a specimen if it wanders into our camp. Kerosene drizzled at a tent door keeps some ants away. Brazil nuts make me sick. Molds grow on chocolate and notebooks. And leaves and fronds and whole plants, including trees, fall to earth constantly here; the sounds sometimes soothe me, sometimes startle.

My fear ebbs then escalates, is momentarily forgotten then wakes me with a jolt. Thunder and fear woke me last night, woke me to the emptiness of equatorial blackness —there is nothing more black, nor more empty than this full place at night. Ruthless rain pelted the double-tarped canopy over the tent, finding deliverance into drainage furrows as wide as a weasel. I lay silent and still with unseeing eyes open to the nothing, utterly powerless. Then it came again, the wakening herald—rumbling echoes of furious earth and heaven rolling across and through the mountains.

It will swallow me, I thought. The earth will roar and open up and receive me. I will die in the Amazon, engulfed by soggy soil and rain. This is what it is like to know the coming of death.

I do not want to die. I do not want to die.

Of course, I did not die. Of course, my fear was once again unfounded. It was only a tremendous storm coming, not death. In the rainforest, across these miles and miles of undulating wet green that is black in the darkness, one can sometimes mistake a storm for death. I've learned that too.

NOTHING IS SIMPLE here except our lives. We eat and work, we eat and work, we eat, and then we sleep. Basically. Of course there are special events that need to be planned: laundry, bathing, walking a new trail.

One of the guys has discovered an accessible waterfall, and I decide to bathe there. The water rushes refreshingly and I almost forget about parasites, bacteria, and such. Movement catches my attention down the shaded shoreline. I see nothing, at first. Then it appears. And disappears, and appears again. It is a *Morpho* butterfly, a butterfly the size of two very large, opened hands, an utterly magnificent butterfly.

I turn to watch it. The undersurface of its wings is a muted brown, making it invisible against the forest shadows on upstrokes. But each downstroke is a revelation of iridescent blue, flashing with dazzling and momentary effect. From breathless beauty to imperceptibility to breathless beauty, and so on. It wafts effortlessly along the stream's banks, over the water, higher then lower, right and then left. I look away for a moment. And it disappears—into its forest, or thin air.

ANOTHER ONE OF our trails leads up the mountain ridge, gently switching back and forth, then ascending steep, muddy inclines. It is a grueling hike, by North American standards. But we get used to it. We especially get used to it because we know it leads to sun, to a place we call the "mirador" or, roughly, "lookout." From the mirador you can see. You can see a landscape so big that it absorbs you. You come upon it thinking that you exist, five-feet-something, a hundred-and-something pounds—but it stops you cold, makes you gasp and then—you are gone, swallowed, a mere background speck.

The scene looks like this: forever forest covers forever mountains that become green-blue with the haze of the far-off horizon. A broad, milky river, with exposed shoulders and sand bars, wends through the lowest and flattest

Coming in the NAR:

New fiction *by Greg Changnon, Emily Meier, Tim Tomlinson, Catherine Gammon, Mary Soderstrom & Kathryn Duhamel*

Non-fiction by *Susan Sterling, Robert Dana, Peter Chilson, Geoffrey Bent & Gary Gildner*

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

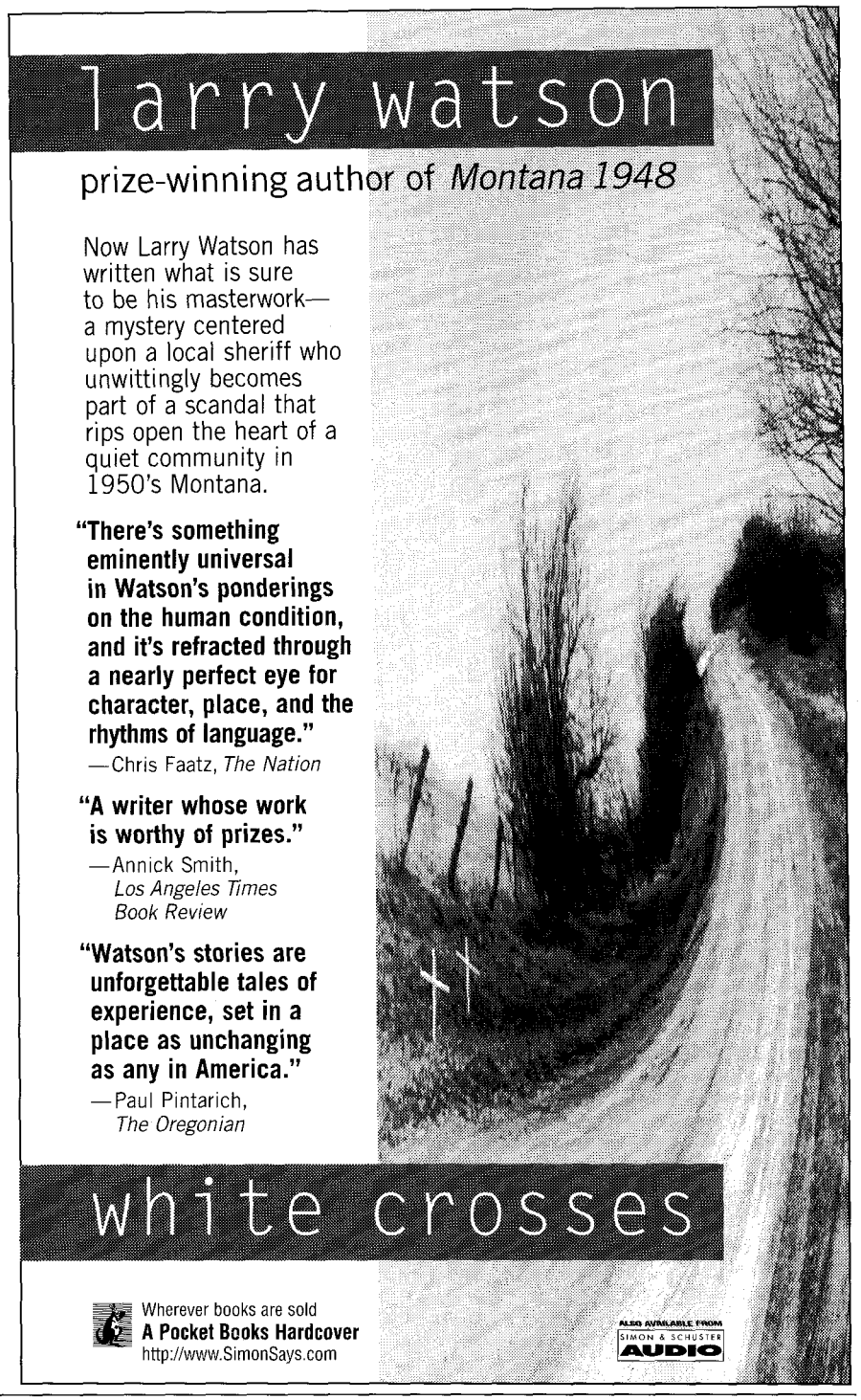
expanse. It leads to the edge of the earth, there is no doubt, no doubt at all. Masses of clouds are reflected on the landscape; their dark shadows cover dozens of peaks at a time, then move on to eclipse others. There is sun between the clouds. There is sun on your face. Across the landscape, white smudges of approaching rain connect heaven and earth.

Nearly two months have gone by. On my last visit to the mirador before we break camp and move back down our mountain, I climb the trail fearlessly, reach the top breathless and sweaty and muddy, and cry as I stand there in complete and exhilarating insignificance.

ON THE MORNING OF departure, I wait on the muddy bank where this adventure began. Though the current is stronger now, I wait with more anticipation than anxiety. Butterflies gather on the slick, gray-brown shore. I squat down to inspect them more closely. Little burnt orange ones in a tight group probe a spot no larger than a teacup. A solitary sulphurous-yellow one drifts by. A pair of zebra-striped white and black swallowtails face each other, wings up and folded. A flitting, prismatic blue loner lands. I watch them, all these butterflies, and think about beauty and fear. Joseph Campbell says, "The conquest of fear yields the courage of life." Here, in the rainforest, in this environment that challenges and awes, I understand.

Movement on the opposite shore catches my eye. The river men have arrived and are readying our dugout. I stand abruptly and wave to them, with both arms. Butterflies lift off all around me. Yellows and oranges, blues, white, brown, striped, speckled, elongate, chunky —butterflies bid me goodbye, I imagine. In reality, they are here to collect minerals from someone or something's urination along the shore. No matter. The point is I am here to see them.

I am here, amid butterflies, in the Amazon. Unafraid, for now. The point is: I have made it. This far. □


larry watson
prize-winning author of Montana 1948
Now Larry Watson has written what is sure to be his masterwork— a mystery centered upon a local sheriff who unwittingly becomes part of a scandal that rips open the heart of a quiet community in 1950's Montana.
"There's something eminently universal in Watson's ponderings on the human condition, and it's refracted through a nearly perfect eye for character, place, and the rhythms of language."
—Chris Faatz, The Nation
"A writer whose work is worthy of prizes."
—Annick Smith, Los Angeles Times Book Review
"Watson's stories are unforgettable tales of experience, set in a place as unchanging as any in America."
—Paul Pintarich, The Oregonian
white crosses
Wherever books are sold
A Pocket Books Hardcover
http://www.SimonSays.com
ALSO AVAILABLE FROM SIMON & SCHUSTER AUDIO

MOVING?

Don't miss a single issue of the country's best fiction magazine; send your old mailing label, and your new address, to:

The North American Review
University of Northern Iowa
Cedar Falls IA 50614-0516

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Travels With Myron

RICHARD TERRILL

MYRON FLOREN IS SITTING in front of us sipping a soft drink after the gig, a dance at some anachronistic ballroom in a small town on a winter night in 1974 or '75. Or it's summer and he's in his trailer with that same soft drink, and it's the same year, or perhaps a year earlier or later. Either way, Myron Floren is the accordion player on The Lawrence Welk Show, the guy who seems to be second in command, who takes over directing the orchestra when Lawrence is ill or when Lawrence is dancing in front of the bandstand and before the TV cameras with his champagne lady or a "chick singer," as we would have called her then.

Myron is relaxing with us after the gig. This has never happened before. We are college students making money for school or rent. We have never before seen Myron (soft spoken but businesslike Myron, show-biz half-smiling Myron), never before seen him relaxed. We are, to those in the crowd of senior citizens who ask us, members of the Myron Floren Orchestra. "For this night only," we could tell them, but dare not. "Where you headed next?" the dancers ask us when we're on a break. "Oh," we reconnoiter, eying each other to get the story straight, "I guess we're headed east. Aren't we?"

It's true. After the gig we'll drive home to our rent and our classes. Our town lies east of here. The eyes of the oldish Welk-ies who ask us light up at what they imagine is the romance of our travel. To be young again and this time live the itinerant life of the working musician! Carefree and on the loose!

Whenever Myron Floren has a gig in Western Wisconsin or Eastern Minnesota, or northern or central Illinois, his manager calls Gerry Way, our bass player and leader, who lives over in Chippewa Falls, the next town from where our college is. How Gerry Way came up with this connection with Myron and other such traveling performers no one has told me. But when Myron's man calls, Gerry in turn calls whoever of the local musicians is around—three or four trumpets, a trombone, a rhythm section, and three or four saxes (including me). Then we pile into cars and drive to whichever county is holding the fair or whichever town the dance. In each region of the country there is a Gerry Way whom Myron's manager would contact, and that Gerry Way gathers whatever musicians he can find to be, for that weekend in that part of the soon-to-be-200-year-old USA, the Myron Floren Orchestra.

"So where are you headed next, boys?"

Once, crammed into three cars, we drove all the way to the Holiday Inn in Gary, Indiana, some eight hours away, to play a dance. The money was especially good and it was summer and there was no school the next Monday and the hotel room was actually paid for. Despite that, a few of us left in one car right after the gig and drove all night home. The fog was so thick we started out with the windows rolled down, heads craned into the night to look for road signs or median strips to let us know we weren't in the ditch.

"Is that the entrance ramp to 94 over there?" Duke the lead trumpet player asked the semi driver in the next lane.

"You're on the entrance ramp," the driver said.

Duke had to be back home to go fishing the next morning, so he had said he was leaving now—after one a.m.—and asked who wanted to go along. Duke was like that—a handsome, ex-football-playing, tobacco chewing free spirit who couldn't live in town because if he didn't get into the woods every day to drop a line or check his beaver traps, he just didn't feel good. I don't know exactly why I went along with Duke and those who had summer jobs the next day, since I didn't. Maybe it was because Stan, the drummer, scared me a little and I didn't want to spend the night in the hotel with him. Not yet thirty, Stan was the only one of us to already have a pot belly. He liked to wear a faded t-shirt that read "Bruenig's Beer," after a brewery that had gone out of business before I turned eighteen. Stan had a tangled web of hair that swished in front of his face when he played his sparse and passionate drums behind the college big band.

After the Myron gigs, though, I was afraid the drinks and joints and practical jokes with Stan might get to be too much for me. I didn't like to be that much out of control. It was a weakness, surely, to be one of the youngest guys in the band and still to be "uptight," as the expression of the day had it. Stan kidded me that I worried too much. Once, on the way to a Myron gig in Matoon, Illinois, I laughed at the series of green Interstate road signs that advertised "Regional Trauma Center," marking every town off the highway in which one could find a hospital.

"Trauma Center!" I laughed out loud each time I saw the sign. I

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thought it was a strange thing to call a hospital.

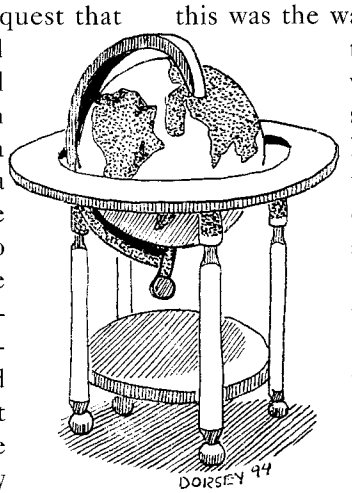
"Trauma," Stan, the drummer repeated. "That's a good nickname for you. Trauma!"

Stan had never had a worry in his life up to that time, I thought. Once he and Duke got Charlene the piano player drunk. She was one of two women in the local pool of musicians and only 16 besides, so she got a harder time even than me. This time she and Stan and Duke were lounging in a hotel room, the two guys with their clothes mostly off, or so the story went by the time I heard it. "Just sit back," Stan told her, but she didn't.

WE ARE IN ELLSWORTH or Austin or LaCrosse with Myron, and I remember now that the scene is a summer one, which means county fair instead of ballroom dance. Myron Floren relaxes in his trailer with a soft drink after the gig. He works us hard at dances, sixty minutes on/fifteen off, more time playing than the Union would allow. But during our breaks, when we're questioned about our itinerary by the faithful, Myron stays on stage and signs autographs. Myron doesn't take breaks. We know he's had at least two more heart attacks than anyone else in the band.

"My dream for the Bicentennial," Myron tells us, collar loosened and Dr. Pepper in his hand, "is to gather a chorus of young people—the picture of health and of America—and stand them before Mount Rushmore. And to stand in front of them myself and conduct them as they sing 'God Bless America.'"

"Is he serious?" each of us wonders, long-haired and bell-bottomed. This is the first time Myron's let us into his trailer, and we look to each other for confirmation of how to react. His television smile doesn't crest or waver. He is serious, we conclude. There is no reason to conclude otherwise: Myron, after all, doesn't take breaks he doesn't need. Only once did he miss one of our gigs—for open heart surgery. We got to that dance on a wintry night in Snowblind, Minnesota, and found that instead of Myron, it was Dick Dale, a Welk singer and woodwind man, leading our little pick up orchestra. What was the difference to us, since the money was the same (and pretty good—fifty 1970s pre-inflated dollars a night; my rent was 52.50 a month)? The difference was that all the music was different. Dick Dale had a different book, and even Myron's music had been hard enough for me. "The Lichtensteiner Polka" was a black forest of sixteenth notes; Myron played "Alley Cat" in the key of z sharp; and there was always some chart a dancer would request that we'd never played before—"Fat Dutch Girl Polka," "Canadian Tango"—and Myron would not turn down a request. On any of these jobs we were supposed to be able to get out of the car, change into our felt-black out-of-style tuxedos (Stan and Duke had bought out a bankrupt men's store and sold the goods to us at a tidy profit), sit down, and play whatever was put before us. That's what professional musicians did, we knew. And we wanted to be professional. Myron all the while smiled at the people and played. Flawlessly. Each beat and each note.



But another difference between Myron and Dick Dale, quite fortunately, was that Dick Dale at least held a quick rehearsal. Dick Dale was a singer—the one who each December crooned "Walkin' in a Winter Wonderland" with his arms around the waist of a Welk girl singer twenty years his junior; the one who stood at the apex of a vee of younger men in cardigan sweaters to belt out in his seamless baritone "Saturday Night," Welk's obligatory rock tune. Dick Dale's face looked something like that of a camel. But being a singer and a pro, Dick Dale didn't want to be smiling in song before the people and have the band miss a repeat sign and send him over a musical cliff with lead weights tied to his polyester. It's hard to keep smiling through that. It was different for instrumentalists like Myron, who might be able to lead the band through a botched key change or missed second ending. People didn't listen that closely to music that didn't have words in it—as long as the beat was solid so they could keep dancing through another highball. And the beat was solid, since Stan the drummer was as dependable onstage as he was certifiably crazy back at the hotel.

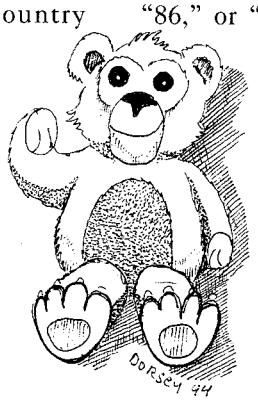
THIS IS THE WAY I remember it, so this was the way it was: there was the gig in Duluth with the weather at some record-setting low and us driving up there in the middle of winter (why always in these stories in the north where I live is the setting the middle of winter? Is there no beginning or end to it?) This night we were to be the Elgart band, led by the big band era holdover of that name, still touring once in a while. I can't remember now if it was Les Elgart or Larry Elgart, and I'm not sure I knew even then. I knew that one band leader brother was dead, either Les or Larry. The other brother played the saxophone. We had the saxophone player. Larry (or Les) was nasty and drunk, swore off-mike, and lacked Myron's rapport when on. He couldn't get over how "women's lib" was invading the music world, since Gerry's lead sax player was Katie, the other woman in our group. She was an exceptionally good player and an extremely attractive woman, which I think pissed off Les (or Larry) even more, the way that some men get hacked about beautiful women who are skillful and who have existed in the world up to this point entirely without them.

We got our money and left the Duluth arena, breath gathered in clouds ahead of us. We were glad

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that Myron was a nicer guy than Elgart. Then we found that somebody had lifted the battery from Gerry's car. We'd get home by dawn.

There was the Outagamie County Fair as early as '72. Like most fairs, it was a series of back-up acts leading up to one big-name headliner. One of the back-up acts at this fair was a young country singer calling herself Tanya Tucker. She was 14, I think, and Duke went over to talk to her between shows. Shy, but a nice kid, he reported, and we all wondered if he would try anything, but he didn't.



I remember more clearly that weekend the Marquis Chimps, another back-up act. I was playing the third alto sax part, which put me on the end of the first row. When Edmunds & Curley, the comedians, were on each night and we didn't have anything to do for a few minutes, I could look off stage to watch the "beautiful assistant" line up the three chimps and set them into their colored chairs, where they waited for the cue we'd play them when the comics were done. The chimp in red, the one sitting at the end of the row, would look at me and scratch the top of his head, and by the last night, second show, I would scratch my head back at him. He would pucker his chimp lips at me, and I would make lips back at him. He swiveled his neck and I swiveled mine. All the while the people in the stands could see me, but not him. They sat in their grandstand across the drag-racing track from the stage, waiting to get more cotton candy, waiting for the fireworks after the show, waiting for school to start in a couple of weeks, none of them seeing the chimp, but seeing only the sax player with the odd facial tics. In turn, I could see from my chair the thick paint on the face of the "girl" who managed the chimps, how her skin had been forced into that tutu. The chimp master, if that's what you called him, was a little old man in a red and white striped jacket. How tired the woman looked. I couldn't guess whom she disliked more.

And there was—always—the music, which meant that there was a thick black book of charts, and Myron or Les or Larry or Dick Dale or even, once, Tennessee Ernie Ford, would call over his shoulder, never missing a beat or a smile before the audience, "47," or "86," or "Just the Way You Look Tonight," and we would have the music unfolded a split second before the downbeat, and we would see the language of the notes before us then for the first time. Or see it, at least, for the first time since the last gig, in Fargo or Appleton, maybe last month or last summer.

I was one of the poorer sight readers in the band, and perhaps the terror of this lottery was part of my Trauma. Worse, reed players were expected to double, and I might be reading along the baritone sax part, belching out low C's and B-flats on that vertical tank of an instrument, when the part would suddenly, almost coyly read, "TO CLARINET." The flight or fight terror would rise in me (could I run off stage to join the chimps? Could I get out of town now as a roadie for Tanya Tucker? "WHERE YA GOIN' NEXT, BOYS?"). In four bars rest I would set down the giant bari sax, take up my plastic clarinet (real clarinets were wood), the one my roommate the year before had given me instead of the fifty bucks he owed me. The reed on the clarinet was dry as a stick, the page peppered with notes as if the tune had been arranged by Jackson Pollock. And what was worse, I had never learned to play the clarinet. My mouth went from blowing into the tank-like bari to blowing through the barrel of this black plastic Derringer inclined to squeak more than sing.

The other players were good—Stan solid as a tree on drums, Gerry like a clock on bass, Duke's lead trumpet as pure and high as good weather, Katie always beautiful on lead alto. They never missed a note. I hid in their arms and loved them for it. I earned each of the fifty dollars one clam at a time.

I don't know what happened to Gerry Way, who I think eventually quit teaching high school chorus in Chippewa Falls, but then went back to it. For a while in between, he was playing weekends in a one man band. I don't think that was meant as a comment about his former mates, but I'm not sure. In fact, the Myron gigs continued for Gerry and some of the others for several years after I left college. The money got even better and the work steadier. Duke, I know, continued to teach junior high band in the small northern Wisconsin town where he could fish regularly. Katie married another of the trumpet players and they eventually ended up in New York, where she sings beautifully in a classy lounge for big money. The piano player who had once been sixteen, and maybe without her clothes, also has ended up in New York, a professional musician. Stan the drummer taught college for awhile, became much more of a friend to me after he calmed down a bit and I became less regularly traumatized by the pages I turned in life. Maybe quitting music helped. Or maybe having played it did.

I imagine by now the once-surviving Elgart brother—Les, or Larry—is also dead. I hope so. Tanya Tucker is now Tanya Tucker. Tennessee Ernie Ford died a few years ago. Lawrence Welk is off the air (and thus Dick Dale doesn't have to sing any more rock and roll covers, which he must have hated).

And I don't know that Myron Floren ever led a chorus of young singers in patriotic American songs before Mount Rushmore on July 4, 1976. I suspect he didn't. I imagine him now retired in Southern California, not taking that red station wagon from the regional airport to meet us or our clones in the Mid-Atlantic, upstate New York, west Texas, or wherever. Myron is taking a break.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

From among these experiences I can pick one that I know happened always exactly as I remember it. I am as sure as if I were reading it now off one of those hand-penned charts in those terrifying black books. In the last set of the night, Myron always called "Lady of Spain," one of those obligatory show pieces for accordion players, the accordion being after all not so much a real musical instrument as an excuse for outrageous displays of technique. I even wrote a line into one of my poems about Myron's version of "Lady of Spain." The poem was a love poem for an old girlfriend—a humorous poem I'm happy to report, given how badly the relationship turned out—and the line said that my excitement at seeing her was like "ten thousand accordions, memorizing 'Lady of Spain.'"

Unlikely as that line sounds, it was a pretty good poem, and the line is true—all except for the part about the ten thousand. In reality, it was just that one guy up there astounding all the dancers on the out chorus. Each time he played that part of "Lady of Spain," no matter which season or state, Myron would raise his one leg against the bottom of the sequined squeeze-box, and paste on a serious look. Somehow, in the way accordion players can, he made each note of that melody into a triplet, so that the sound of the line was tremulous and bee-like, though still exact. He leaned his forehead always to the same side in concentration (I noticed this the way I had noticed the mugging of the chimp in red offstage in Outagamie County). The sweat on Myron's brow, I remember, was real. Maybe he had to think for a moment about what his hands had to do to play these furious tremolos in "Lady of Spain." Or maybe he'd played this tune too many times to have to worry about missing a single note.

Maybe he worked to make look easy what he was making look hard. God bless America, he was that good. □

An original paperback

The Whole Story
Editors on Fiction

A Collection of Essays and Stories
Edited by Warren Slesinger

ISBN 0-930769-12-0
312 pages $19.95

Each of the editors explains the choice of a particular story, describes the editorial procedures and defines the editorial policies of the literary magazine in which the story originally appeared.

Written especially for this collection, each of the essays contains the complete text of an exemplary story by a contemporary writer with the editor's comments.

The Alaska Quarterly Review
The Antioch Review
CALYX, A Journal of the Arts and Literature by Women
The Carolina Quarterly
Chelsea
Fiction
The Georgia Review
The Gettysburg Review
The Greensboro Review
Indiana Review
The Iowa Review
Iowa Woman
New England Review
New Letters
The North American Review
Northwest Review
Prairie Schooner
The Sewanee Review
Shenandoah
Southwest Review
The Texas Quarterly
The Threepenny Review
The Virginia Quarterly Review

Also of interest to students, teachers and writers

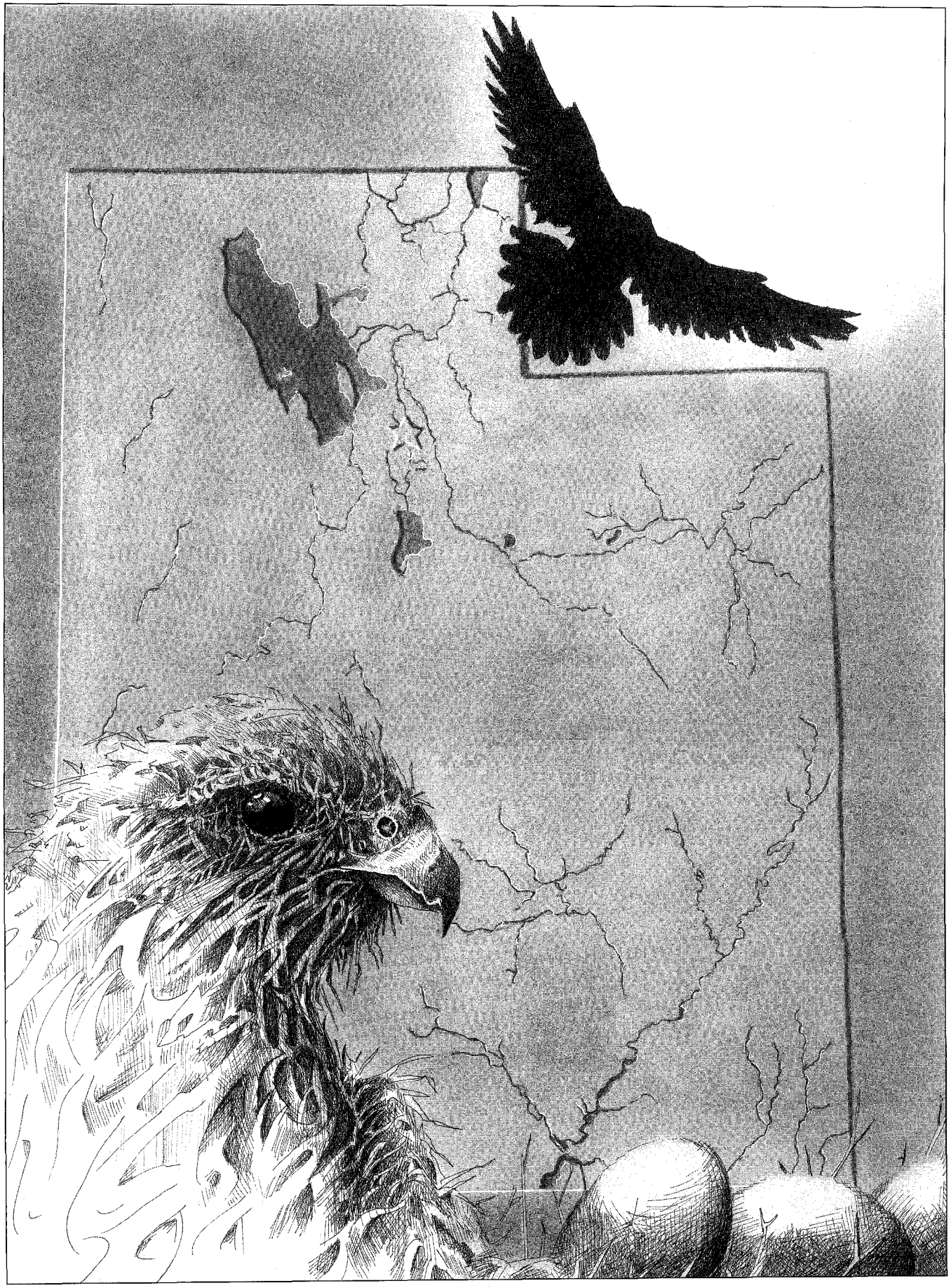
Spreading the Word
Editors on Poetry

ISBN 0-937069-10-4 $14.95

The Bench Press

1355 Raintree Drive Columbia SC 29212
803-781-7232

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



BENJAMIN SIGMUND

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Salt Lake

A Story by Liza Wieland

When her mother was dying, the air would not clear. In Utah, this is called an inversion. Even at noon, the sky would be dusky, with grief, she thought, in language that seemed to float into her head out of nowhere, float like a net of souls over the city, hanging, eyeless desire, she thought all this too, that's what the soul was, as yet unmet ecstasy, a ghostly peace. She had these ideas sitting by her mother's bed, holding her mother's hand, sometimes when washing the old body, so old and wracked as to be foreign, not a body but a series of protrusions and declivities. The sky over Salt Lake City, between the Wasatch and the far off Cedar Mountains, turned itself inside out, became the unbreathable essence of air, obscurely felt, like a kiss.

Her name was Em, not short for Emma or anything else. In high school, she said, I am an initial, and her friends laughed, but she didn't, herself, know what she meant, how she meant it to be funny. Now she drove a truck for United Parcel Service, tended children at St. Mary's Church during Sunday Mass. She had decided there was no difference in the two kinds of tending she did, children belonging to someone else, a mother who had worked to remain mysterious to her daughter, worked at it like a missionary, stalking the neighborhood, raising Em's questions to a fever pitch: where did we come from, when did we get here, why did we stay, and who is my father?

They had lived in Salt Lake for 22 years, since Em was six, but about time before that, her mother would never tell her. They were alone in the world, Em believed, except for her mother's brother in California. He had come to her high school graduation, ten years before, and that was the last she saw of him. His name was Teddy and he was a radio personality down in Bakersfield, a rabble rouser on one of the country western stations, a man who could say anything he wanted between the hours of 5:00 and 10:00 every weekday morning. He's much beloved, Em's mother said, shrugging her shoulders. He was master of ceremonies at cattle auctions, county fairs and local political fund-raisers. He used to be a beautiful carpenter, her mother said once, her eyes closed, a smile twitching over her face, he made that chair you're sitting in. It was a rocker, plain but solid, with thick slats like, Em always imagined, the arm and leg bones of a big man. Em remembered when Uncle Ted appeared at her graduation, he looked like a beautiful baby, his face round and soft, pink, clean-shaven, so that it was hard not to kiss him a second time, hard to let go of his hand. His thin yellow hair lifted perfectly in the breeze and set back down again while everyone else's was frayed and punished by all that wind trying to get out of the valley. At the reception afterwards, he struck up a conversation with a girl named Paula Chess, a quiet classmate of Em's. No one had ever thought much about Paula—she was pretty enough, but she did her work and then seemed to fade back to North Salt Lake. One afternoon's banter with Ted Ames from Bakersfield seemed to change her life forever. People said this: on a windy day in early June in her eighteenth year, Paula Chess became a hot ticket. It was extraordinary. Boys appeared to be drawn to her against their wills. She worked in a restaurant called The Pie, and all that summer, the place was filled with young men, each one alone in a booth, slowly eating pizza, much more of it than anybody could want, waiting for Paula to finish her shift. Within four years, she was married three times. She had two children and a blowzy, tempestuous look when Em saw her at Harlan's, sniffing at the produce, handling it with a slow familiarity that made other women look away. A chance meeting with Uncle Ted had, it seemed, done that.

And now Em was going to have to call him, tell him her mother, his sister needed—what? To say goodbye? Settle the family fortune? She laughed to herself, one short *ha*, and sat down by the telephone in the kitchen. She could hear a buzzing in the living room, the home-care worker saying something to her mother. Her hands shook. She felt hot all over, sweaty. She would have to change her uniform shirt.

"Hello Uncle Ted," she practiced in a whisper. "It's Em Stanley. Your niece? Long time no hear from. Hi Uncle Ted. It's Em. Mary Anne's daughter? Uncle Ted? Hello. It's your niece, Em.

He would know that. He had only one niece. She pressed the buttons and waited, cleared her throat, listened to a scratching, then the sped-up, computerized beep of the numbers she'd dialed, and finally nothing, until the blat of the busy signal.

Then she was crying into her crossed arms on the kitchen table. She wanted to make a lot of noise, sob for hours, maybe whole days. But she had 55 minutes for lunch, and then afternoon deliveries over near the University. Easter baskets for college students from their Moms and Dads in Ogden or Provo, two-pound chocolate eggs, strands of green Easter grass floating out of the truck for weeks afterward. Delighted,

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

unwashed graduate students over in the Avenues, who came to the door clutching a pencil. Intelligent, Em thought, and hung-over. She'd hand them the d.i.a.d. board to sign, and it was always the graduate students who noticed. They'd smile with a mixture of relief and pain and say "Whoa, magic," or "Cool, an Etch-a-Sketch," like they'd been locked inside too long with their dissertations and couldn't believe what the world was coming to.

It took couple of days, but she did finally get Uncle Ted on the telephone. She noticed right away that he had a radio voice, low but not growling, and perfectly unaccented. No one would ever be able to guess where he'd come from. She thought she could hear something like her mother's voice, or her own. She hardly knew how to explain—tone, maybe? Geography? Physics, which is all about motion and force? Something like that: both their voices had the quality of rushing ahead over the words to keep a secret, hide laughter or tears.

"Em. Sweetheart," he said. "How nice to hear from you."

"I know it's kind of a surprise."

"A good one, though. How have you been? How's your mother?"

"I'm fine. Just fine. But I'm calling about Mom. She's not well. I mean she hasn't been for a long time, you know. Well, I guess you don't know. But I think, I mean—God—she's just so much worse. I can't— You should come and see her is all."

There was a long pause, and then Ted Ames said, *Wow*, his voice like a tire squealing against a high curb. The sound of it made Em wince.

"It's a surprise, I know," she said again.

"No, no. Well, yes, of course it is. You think I should come soon, then?"

"Yes. Soon."

Uncle Ted said he could get to Salt Lake at the end of the week. He would drive. Eighteen hours. No problem. His voice was smooth again, coming at you from radio land, this is Ted Ames, catch ya later, over and out.

When Em told her mother he was coming, her hands briefly uncurled on top of the blanket. She called to him, my Teddy, as if he were in the next room. The strength of her voice shocked both of them, an invisible force hidden among the sticks and empty tunnels and refuse her body had become. She smiled at Em.

"I was just dreaming," she said, still in that full, healthy voice. "I was just dreaming that Gertrude Himmelfarb was trying to smother me with a pillow."

"Oh, Mother," Em said, laughing. She felt a wave of relief, then, quick at its heels, terrible sadness. This was her old familiar Mother, mother of the *non sequitur*, mother of unlikely dreaming, mother of mysterious connection to what she read in the newspaper. "Why did you dream that?" Em asked, when what she really wanted to say was, I miss you already.

"Manners," her mother said, her voice smaller, shrinking. "Everybody's lost them." She sighed and closed her eyes. The last thing she said before she fell asleep was "Saint Anthony." Em followed her logic completely. Saint Anthony was the patron of lost things. You prayed to him, promised a dollar or two to get whatever it was returned. If people had lost their manners, well, maybe Saint Anthony could find them. In this way watching her mother die was like learning a new language. It was like talking to children, listening to children and their long stories about who did what, where and when, stories that were part wish, part television, part overheard conversation. When she read Bible stories to the children in the nursery at St. Mary's, she often asked the older ones to tell the stories back to her. She did this so they would learn the stories—it was a kind of memorization—but also for her own amusement. The children fixed their attention on the smallest details, what was the name of the donkey who carried the virgin Mary to Bethlehem, did the good Samaritan have a wife and children, what kind of fish fed the five thousand. They wanted to see a mustard seed. Em thought their versions of events were better than the originals. More logical, the connections less mysterious.

In the usual nursery group, there was a two-year old named Ellen Woolf. Though Em tried to resist the feeling, Ellen Woolf was far and away her favorite child. That Ellen was cute and talkative and sweet was part of it, but the attraction also had to do with Ellen Woolf's father, a widower about Em's age. He was a pleasant, good-looking man, a wildlife biologist. The handwriting was on the wall, Em told herself in the language of one of the children's favorite Bible stories. They found this story believable because it was, as the graduate students said, magic. Em could see herself and Daniel Woolf being drawn together like slow magnets. It seemed inevitable and therefore horrifying, or like a dream in which she could do nothing to stop impending destruction, Gertrude Himmelfarb advancing with the blindingly white pillow clutched in her hands. Em imagined herself trying to get out of the way. She thought, here is one more person, two more including Ellen, that she would have to do things for, take care of. She would keep having to *deliver*. All those boxes, parcels, in the back of her truck, all that rushing up to the front doors of strangers, the face behind the screen, hands reaching, smiles, delight, serious nods of the head: *yes, I have been waiting for that.* Behind these people, Em could see a life, the television on, the smells of food cooking, dailiness that had been interrupted for a gift. Once in a while she wanted to be on the other

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

side, to greet someone who said, Here, I brought this for you.

Uncle Ted arrived with flowers for Em's mother and a bottle of Glenlivet for Em. He told her if she didn't like a good slug of single malt now and then, well, it was time to learn. He'd driven overnight from Bakersfield because it was cooler, and there was something next-worldly about driving through the desert in pitch darkness. Em noticed he said it that way, *next-worldly*, and she crumpled a little and shot a look at her mother, who did not seem to be bothered. The three of them sat in the living room, now a bedroom because the stairs were too much trouble.

"You look wonderful, Ted," her mother said. "I guess California still agrees with you."

"It does," Ted told her, "though I want to move up north. Oakland or Sacramento. Have my finger on the pulse." He turned to Em. "You should come out, you know. To visit, anyway. You'd love it."

Em closed her eyes to shake off the sense of the floor tilting out from under her. Her uncle was talking about *later*, about *after*. She felt loneliness come into the room like it was a person. Uncle Ted smiled at her mother then, winked.

"So you took Pedro," he said.

"I've always had him," her mother said. "You just forgot."

"What Pedro?" Em said.

Ted got up from his chair and walked over to the lamp on the other side of the room. The entire base of the lamp was the figure of a bullfighter, in full dress, looking haughty and scared at the same time.

"*Voilà* Pedro," he said, surveying the room. "You got a lot of her stuff. That fake Rembrandt, those sconces. *Sconces*. I can't believe I remembered that word. You got the desk, that rickety desk, and all the teacups."

"Who's *her*?" Em said.

"Your grandmother," Ted told her. "And those chairs, and the front hall table. And the piano. Hey, where's the piano?"

"Sold."

"What piano?" Em said.

"Didn't you know your mother played the piano?"

"I had no idea."

"She was quite good in her day."

"Weren't those player pianos something?" Em's mother said, and she and Ted laughed.

Em was stunned. Her mother had barely been able to speak for the last five days and suddenly now she made a joke.

"Don't be fooled," Ted said to Em. "It wasn't any player piano. It was a baby grand, and she could sit there and play all day with this funny expression like she was about to drool."

"Sort of like now," Em's mother said.

"No," Ted told her. "You don't look all that bad. I believe you could pull through."

"She *won't*," Em said suddenly, and her uncle and her mother turned their heads and stared.

"Well," her mother said, smoothing the blanket.

"What else don't I know?" Em said then. "What else? Tell me everything."

"Did you know your mother once drank so many martinis that she fell into the oven?"

"It wasn't on," her mother said.

"Where was this?"

Ted and Mary Anne looked at each other. Guilty, Em thought. Guilty, guilty, guilty.

"Colorado Springs, maybe?" Ted said.

"Maybe," Mary Anne said.

"Mother. When did you live in Colorado Springs?"

"Oh, before you were born. I was just a girl."

Uncle Ted told the story this way.

When Em's father was a much younger man he fell in love with a woman named Mary Anne Stanley and they had a daughter. She was a waitress in a steak house out on Nevada Avenue in Colorado Springs, far north towards the highway. All the itinerants ate there when they came to town, all the guys building for the government up in Bijou, because the food was cheap, and they sat together in packs because they had no one but each other. They got to know what you did before, everybody did something before their present line of work, and they kidded you about it. When the subcontractors and their crews heard Em's father had been at the Air Force Academy, they asked him why he wanted to learn to drop out of the sky, and then what changed his mind.

"Hey, Sky Boy," they said. "How come you gave up on flying?"

"Gravity," Em's father said.

He first noticed Mary Anne Stanley's hair, which was a shade of light brown that always looked like it was about to dazzle itself into red, before his very eyes. And the more beer he drank, the more worried he got that this transformation would happen when he wasn't looking, that her hair would suddenly catch up all the light when he was turned away to answer somebody's fool question or light a cigarette, so that he'd be missing heavenly fire for the sake of a goddamn wooden match.

So he left his name tucked under his plate with the tip. He said he'd be in later that week for supper.

"Thanks for your note," she said when she saw him again.

"You're welcome," he said, and then waited for whatever would come after that.

"You know what I especially liked about it?" she said.

"What?" he said.

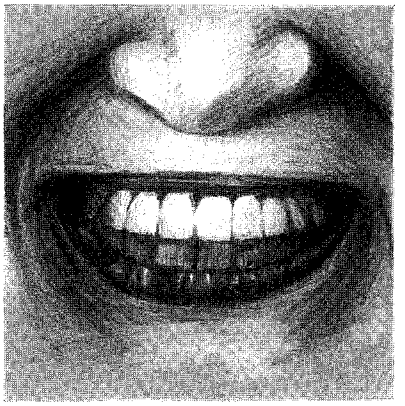
PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You didn't leave too big of a tip. That would have made me nervous."

"I have a car," Em's father said, thinking that was probably not the beginning, but more like the middle of the sentence he ought to have said.

"Fine," Mary Anne said. "I do too."

They went for drives in the general direction of Cripple Creek, along behind Pike's Peak. He liked seeing the Peak that way, a little foreshortened, then stretched out again as they drove on, made into something portentous, like the mouth of a tunnel, moving west and then dropping off as the tunnel itself fell into the earth, secretly, ominously. On these drives, Mary Anne Stanley told him all those things he needed to know: her age, which was 26, that she lived with her mother, who was widowed young and used to drink too much, and was now about stone deaf. That she worked as a dressmaker during the daytime, alone with her mother and a mannequin in the deep silence of her mother's house. That she herself wasn't in love with anybody and hadn't been for years. Except maybe certain singers on the radio, who could make her feel like her heart had suddenly dropped a few inches, hooked itself onto one of the sharp parts of her ribcage and was swinging there like a star in the dark space of her chest.



She talked about her mother in slow detail, as if she hadn't spoken to anyone in a long time and had to feel her way back into words. She stared out the front windshield of the car while Em's father drove, and he noticed that her eyes stayed wide open, like they were stuck—she didn't ever blink when she talked, the way everyone else in the world did. He thought at first it made her look a little crazy. He waited for Mary Anne Stanley to blink the same way he waited for her hair to turn red, but with a new heaviness all along his right side, the side closest to her as they sat in the front seat of his car, as they faced the white peaks of Mount Princeton, Mount Harvard, Mount Yale. He thought about men, women and children heading west, and how they must have felt when they saw these mountains, the Collegiate Range, for the first time. He wondered if they thought about beauty or about being bone tired, but he thought he was too young to know the answer to such a question.

"In California, her relatives sometimes put her in the state hospital to do a treatment program," Mary Anne told him. "In the Napa Valley. Somebody's idea of a joke, right? Very funny. All those grapes turning into wine. And Mother sitting not a half-mile away, catching whiffs of the harvest, surrounded by women talking to trees and playing with dolls."

She told him that her mother used to point up at the weaving clouds of starlings in October and November, and say, *Drunk again*. When Mary Anne was ten, her mother taught her the exact word for what the starlings did to the vines after harvest, gleaning, she'd say, and her face made a kind of death's head as her mouth formed the word, exposing her clenched teeth in a horrifying grin.

"Then she would always point straight at me. I never did know why. But after a while I took it to mean she knew who I was. It was her way of making an inside joke. Far, far inside.

"When she got better, it was a different kind of joke, a play on words. When she was well, she was very funny, and very clever," Mary Anne said to Em's father. "I mean *is*. She's well now. But during the in-between times, she'd say, 'You've got to take my clothes to the gleaners,' and we'd about die laughing. She still says it sometimes now, and we still laugh, but we never talk about how the joke got started."

He took her hand and held it while she told him about living in Seattle, about coming home from school when she was fifteen and seeing her mother passed out in the park. It had happened two or three times, her mother setting out to meet her at school but unable to make the whole trip. Always Mary Anne sat down beside her and tried to look like a girl whose mother had fallen asleep. She'd wondered what in the world such a girl would look like. She'd try to arrange her features, make her face settle into a look of calm expectation. She'd lean back on her elbows, stretch out her legs and watch other children playing, their parents very much awake and watching *them*. She'd aim her body west, face into the sun and imagine the coast, not very far away, the fog banks drifting in from who knows where and boiling up to become the purplish clouds she could see in the distance. She said that was what she believed a regular fifteen-year-old girl would be thinking about: the coast, the weather. She worked to keep her face calm, to wait for her mother to wake up. She wished she carried a pocket mirror so she could check up on herself.

"Sometimes I thought about what I was going to make her for supper. I'd work my way through the meal forwards and backwards."

She'd reel off a night's menu, chicken, rice, green beans, chocolate cake for dessert, and Em's father wondered if she knew where she was right then, that she was with him.

They took these drives to Cripple Creek for a

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

month, every Sunday afternoon. Sometimes they went fishing. On Friday and Saturday nights, Em's father would meet Mary Anne Stanley, and they would have something to eat and drink a beer in the back of King's, the restaurant where she worked, while the manager kept an eye on them and the busboys did the last sweep of the evening. She seemed so comfortable, and it made him wonder at times if she cared he was there. He asked her if this was how grown women were. There seemed to be whole lifetimes between twenty and twenty-six, those years filled with mysteries, shadowy presences.

January and February stayed cold and snowy in 1967. Em's father did finish work out at the Air Force Academy, north of Colorado Springs. After that, he'd build furniture or invent small repair jobs at Mary Anne's mother's house, or else they'd go skiing. He got to be a good skier. Sometimes they'd follow trails up behind Manitou, or around Pike's Peak, but if the roads weren't bad, they drove out to Green Falls or Woodland Park, places where they felt altitude and gravity more fiercely than anywhere they'd ever been. Mary Anne said it was like being hung on the side of the world.

They'd ski for an hour, then sit and drink a bottle of beer, not saying much, listening to the cold white world settle in close around them. Em's father liked the way snow and distance seemed to be able to freeze human time, while some other kind of time went on at its own speed. The sun moved over the trees, and no one aged a second or changed in any way.

"It's a little like being dead," Mary Anne said once, and then she asked Em's father if he ever wondered what that was going to be like, being dead.

"Never," Em's father said. And she asked him if he wasn't just a little bit curious, and he told her he guessed he'd have plenty of time to be curious about it when the time came.

"But what if it's not a stretch of time or a place you get to?"

"Then I'll be surprised."

"I hate surprises."

She said it with such force and outright anger that Em's father reached over and took hold of her hand. He promised never to surprise her. He knew he was telling the truth.

He asked her one last time: "When I go back to California, will you come?"

"No, " Mary Anne said. "I can't move Mother and I can't leave her. And you can't stay, I know. There's nothing for you here."

"Ask me to stay. All you have to do is ask."

"I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Maybe I don't want it that bad."

The woods had darkened around them, imperceptibly, so that they were now half in shadow. They hated all this useless talk.

"Then I can't stay," he said as they gathered up their packs and put on their skis.

"I know," Mary Anne told him.

Mary Anne was working on bridesmaids' dresses in the early spring, the whole house full of lace, tulle and sateen and even bottles of nail polish to match, four or five nineteen-year-old girls being measured, pinned and hemmed. The conversation turned to whether Mary Anne was married, and then why not—not conversation, mostly long stories about husbands-to-be and fathers and brothers. At first, she would say that she didn't want to get married, but she could see it made other women uneasy, it wasn't usual, and she was afraid of losing business that way. So she began telling them that she just hadn't met the right man yet. The time she said it while Em's father was there, she looked back over her shoulder at him. She didn't make a face, roll her eyes or lift her shoulders in a gesture of *what else could I do?* She just stared. She knew something was breaking inside him, that he felt a coldness, a sudden frost at the very roots of his hair, like he'd put on a helmet of needles. It seemed to him that the light in the room changed, modulated somehow, and the colors of nail polish in the bottles on the table in front of Mary Anne seemed garish. He thought suddenly that nail painting must have originated out of some ancient admiration of bloodstains on the hands of the hunters, or the women who cleaned the animals and then cooked them. It seemed barbaric. He let himself out the back door, and stood in the cold,

"Sometimes I don't understand myself," he told her later. "I'm thinking about leaving a little sooner. Sorry to surprise you."

She said it didn't surprise her. She could tell once he'd made the decision to go, there wouldn't be much reason to wait.

They went fishing and built a fire low down on the trail near the Camp River. It made them thoughtful, and sad, like always.

"Why is that?" she said.

"I'm not sure," Em's father said. "Because our backs are cold. Because you can never really get warm enough."

Streaks of daylight still managed to get down through the trees to where they were, a quarter turn to the north around Pike's Peak, toward Woodland Park. Still, they had the sense the fire was drawing some kind of nocturnal life out of the woods, tender, lonely animal life that would move in close but never let itself be

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

touched. They could see the shape of a raccoon, as big as a German Shepherd, just beyond the cast light of the fire. The raccoons had come to expect some offering, and Mary Anne knew this, and so brought sugar cubes, apple cores, stale bread, and left it ten yards away. Three raccoons gathered from out of the darkness, and moved roundly, barrel-like, toward the food, puzzled over it for a few seconds, and carried it away.

"They wash everything," Mary Anne said. "If the fire weren't going so loud, we could hear them down in the river."

She was silent.

"It's funny, though," she said after a while. "The sugar cubes. I bet they'll wash them and wash them and wash them till there's nothing left."

But Mary Anne Stanley got away first. Mrs. Stanley woke up in the middle of the night in March and decided that she was dying.

"Mary Anne," Mrs. Stanley called, her voice ringing and high, "it's time. We've got to go now. Seattle. I've got to get to my people."

Mary Anne at first told her mother she'd feel differently in the morning.

"In the morning?" Mrs. Stanley said, the ringing of her voice turned to a caw, the sound of someone trapped. "Look outside. It is the morning. We have to go, I'm telling you."

It took two days to make arrangements. For the whole of one of those days, nobody answered the telephone in Seattle. They wondered if really there were any Seattle relations. They both believed she was dying, couldn't get over how apparent it was, how the texture of her skin and hair changed, softened, even her coloring became high, and like an over-excited child she imagined all sorts of earthly delights. They watched Mrs. Stanley become the image of her daughter, and Em's mother came to see herself in high relief, her willfulness, the way her course ran parallel to the world's but seemed not to intersect it at any point.

Em's father drove them up to Denver to take the train out to San Francisco, where Mary Anne's cousin would be waiting to drive them north. He tried to find a moment to say some last words, something about how they'd meet up again, and where, but there was never a chance. Even on the steps of the train, when he pulled her aside, meaning to tell her that he'd write to her and she should do the same as soon as she got to Seattle, even then Mary Anne put her arms around him quickly and said, Not now.

In California, in January, Em's father received Mary Anne's letter about the birth of the child, and called her. It was the first time they'd spoken since she left Colorado Springs. She told him her mother had died on the train, just outside of Salt Lake City, and so that's where she'd stayed. She let him listen while the baby wailed into the telephone. Em's father felt his throat tighten and tears come into his eyes.

He sent her money over the next eighteen years, but they thought they should stay out of each other's business as much as was possible or decent, get on with their lives.

When he finished, Em said, "You're my father, aren't you? You're not Uncle Ted. There's no Uncle Ted about it, is there?"

Ted shrugged. "I had a wife later. And kids. It was complicated. And then we just got used to things."

"I have to go to work," Em said, which was true. But all the same, she didn't think she could be in the same room with the man standing in front of her, not right then. She could hardly explain it to herself, as she drove over to dispatch and got in her truck. *I'm inside a big brown bear*, she sometimes thought when she was out making deliveries, like a mantra, *I'm inside a big brown bear*. A customer had told her once that that's what UPS trucks looked like, big brown bears lumbering down the street. That's what you do if you're out in the woods freezing. You kill a big brown bear and crawl inside it. Easy, right? And you just stay there, with all the blood and guts and the truth of all that viscera, and you just learn how to stand it.

On top of the First Security Bank building downtown, Salt Lake's female peregrine falcon, widowed a month earlier, seems to have found a new mate. Em heard this on the radio. Peregrine falcons, the news announcer said, may be rare and endangered birds, but they don't seem to have much trouble finding each other. The apparent new mate was a male with slightly different markings and habits from the bird that died earlier. Loss of the previous male forced the female to abandon three eggs she was incubating, and the female was rarely seen in the downtown sky after that, prompting concerns that she might abandon the area. *But Daniel Woolf, a biologist for the Utah Division of Wildlife Services now believes she was out doing a lot of flying to find an available male, and the effort paid off. She has been seen mating with her new partner, and they are spending a lot of time around the First Security Bank nest. Falcons can produce a second clutch of eggs in a season if something happens to the first set of eggs.*

"So," Daniel Woolf said, "maybe if we're lucky, they'll pull this thing off."

Em listened in silence to Daniel Woolf's voice. She wondered if it pained him to talk about the death of a spouse, even this way, in the animal world. His voice sounded kind, enthusiastic, hopeful, but not moved. It didn't give anything away. She admired that control,

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

feeling lately that she herself was always on the far edge of it. And somehow her unsteadiness didn't feel like grief, that was the puzzling part of watching her mother die. And now the revelation of Uncle Ted—it was hard to stop calling him that—too. Not sadness or shock but a kind of spin, a sense that her body was moving faster and faster, getting away from her plans, taking on a life of its own. She didn't know, some days, exactly what she was going to do or say. Em thought when she got used to everything, she'd be all right, and then the very idea made her feel shaky, hysterical. *Get used to everything?* How could she possibly, ever?

But on Sunday, in the nursery at St. Mary's, she was calmer, though she felt as if, all her life, she might have been mistaken, duped about everything. Watchful, that's what she'd have to be now, vigilant. Daniel Woolf came in, released Ellen into the swarm of children, and walked over.

"Good morning," he said. "How you doing?"

"Fine," Em told him. "I heard you on the radio the other day. About the peregrine falcons."

"Right. A great story, isn't it?"

Em nodded. She was about to say, getting a new mate is always a great story, but she wasn't sure how he'd take it, or even how she meant it herself. "Ellen looks cute today."

"Ellen *is* cute today, " Daniel Woolf said and laughed. "And she was cute yesterday, and she'll be cute tomorrow."

"She's got some good PR going for her too."

"Would you like to have lunch with us after church? We usually just go for a hamburger. Nothing fancy. Quick. I know you're taking care of your mother now, so—"

"I'd like that," Em said. "My uncle's in town, so I can take a break now and then." She looked at a clutch of children who were beginning to argue over a book. "He and Mother are devoted to each other," she said. "Excuse me. I see trouble brewing."

She began to feel a terrible thirst. She sat by her mother's bed in the living room, drinking glass after glass of water and waiting to hear all about Ted Ames, now that he'd gone back to Bakersfield, the departure from Colorado Springs, what her mother had been thinking all those years. She waited, bent forward in Ted Ames' chair, night after night, waiting for everything to come clear between them. When Em was with her mother in that last month, she felt there was a screen separating them, more substantial than a window screen, like the panel inside a confessional, where the priest and the petitioner see only the dark outlines of each other. When one moves, the other detects a kind of halt and catch, the slow-film stutter of bodies under strobe lights. Em remembered this even though she hadn't been to confession in years. She had wanted to wait, rack up some sins. She felt them coming.

"I thought," her mother said one morning, "I thought, I can get one state over but no more. And then Mother died." After that she was silent for a long time. Em held her hand, petted it. She loved her mother's hands, which were large and strong. She wondered that morning if she loved them beyond reason, if in the throes of grief she would want to have them severed from her mother's dead body so she could keep them in an air-tight bag in a drawer. She'd heard of Vietnam veterans doing that with Vietcong ears and thumbs. A talisman. But that had to do with battle, with enemies. But how could you remember if you didn't have something to hold on to? Em's own hands began to shake then, her teeth chattered. Oh God, she thought. I can't do this. I won't make it through. I'll die too.

A couple of days she called in to work, said she had to stay home, her mother had taken a turn for the worse. Her manager at UPS was a college student named Rusty Wilson, a nice guy with a shaved head. He was always trying to talk Em into going back to school, telling her she should think seriously about it for the coming fall semester. It fills a person's every waking moment, he said. He told Em she should take a day whenever she felt like it, even if her mother wasn't worse. They could cover for her. So Em didn't have to lie to Rusty Wilson, but she did anyway. She said to herself that she wasn't sure where she ended and truth began. A strange way to put it, but exactly how she felt, that there was nothing true about her. She imagined the day after her mother died she would go back to work, walk up and kiss Rusty Wilson, and that kiss would bring her back into proper relation with the world. She thought she might have to kiss a lot of people, at work, at church. It was beginning to seem like the only way she'd be able to repay anyone's kindness. She raised her mother's hand to her lips and kissed it. There. Then she turned the hand over and laid the palm against her cheek. Her mother's eyelids fluttered, a beautiful swoon. Everything her mother did these days was beautiful, graceful, the most perfect gestures imaginable.

"Why didn't you ever tell me?" Em whispered, patting her own face with the cool palm of her mother's hand.

"I didn't know how," her mother said.

"Did you think I'd guess?"

Her mother nodded, ran the tip of her tongue over her lips. "And so you did," she said.

The light changed in the room, slowly, from yellow to blue.

"After I go, you'll stay in the house?"

"Of course, Mother. Yes."

"Change things around, though. Be adventurous."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

■

"Like paint, you mean?"

"Anything. Anything you want."

"I was thinking I'd touch up Pedro."

"That old goat."

"No, Pedro the lamp."

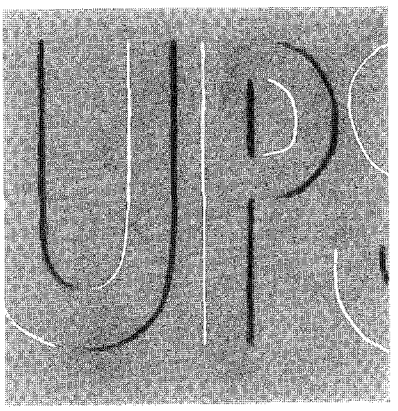
Her mother smiled, waved her free hand.

"Mom, what did Ted mean, you got Pedro?"

She waved her hand again, a strange, courtly gesture, which Em had come to understand meant *it's too long a story to tell you now*. She was beginning to have to make things up on her own, fill in the blanks where it appeared her mother would never be able to. She looked over at Pedro, the lamp, the enigmatic smile on his perfect face, the downward angle of his glance.

"He is kind of a goat, isn't he?" Em said. "He's checking out the señoritas, isn't he? He's waiting to make his move. I never noticed it before."

There was a knock at the door, a child selling chocolate bars to make money for her school. As she gave her spiel, Em looked off over her head and down the street. She had the sensation sometimes, standing like that in the front yard, that the entire Wasatch Front was leaning dangerously west, looming like a wave, taking a long time to break. She felt, almost, the great suck of atmosphere that would pull her under the mountains, how she and her mother would lie still together in their cold Pompeii. The girl was saying something about team jerseys, about a trip that she might be able to take.



"Yes," Em said. "Come inside a second. I'll get my purse." She tried never to say no to these children. Once when she had closed the door and turned to her mother with a Toblerone clutched in each hand, her mother had said, *it's like taking candy from a baby*, and they had laughed together and eaten most of the Toblerones before dinner, washing the candy down with beer.

When Em came back with her purse, the girl was standing at the foot of her mother's bed, gazing down at the candy bar and speaking in a low voice.

"Cocoa butter," she was saying, "chocolate, non-fat milk, milk fat, lactose and soya lecithin, peanuts, sugar, sugar, dextrose, salt, citric acid to preserve freshness." She handed the candy bar back to Em's mother.

Em waited.

Then her mother said, "What are you going to do with all this money?" and the girl recited all of it again: jerseys for the girls' softball team, a trip to Lake Powell at the end of the season.

"You're sick," the girl said then, not a question.

"I am," Em's mother said. "But not as bad as I was yesterday. I think candy helps." She was smiling.

"You'll get better," the girl said. "Don't worry." She turned to Em. "That'll be two-fifty," she said.

"Give me two of them then, okay?" Em said. She took out five dollar bills.

"I'll give you one for free," the girl said. "Here. For you."

"Thanks. How's your season going?"

"Not too bad. Won one, lost one."

"What do you play?"

"Second base. Third when she makes me."

"She?"

"Coach."

"Third is a lot of pressure."

"I know," the girl said. "It's like you're everybody's last chance. I hate it."

Em's mother turned on the lamp. Then she held the chocolate bar in both hands, turned it over as if she were searching for a way in.

"I don't know," she was saying, "how something so small can take up so much space."

They stood still until the girl looked up at Em and said, "She's right, you know."

A minute later, Em watched the girl walk up the block. She seemed not to be stopping at any other houses, then she turned the corner of E Street and disappeared. Em doubted there was any such girl on any such softball team, that she was a vision, a sign. She thought of calling Ted in Bakersfield, but felt like there was no room in her head for him. She would get him on the phone, but then not be able to talk, or even to concentrate on anything he might want to say to her. She stepped back into the house and closed the door.

Her mother had fallen asleep, still holding the chocolate in her hands. Em walked over and stood at the foot of the bed, exactly where the girl had been.

"Mom?" she whispered. Her mother stirred but did not wake. "Mom," she said again, "admit it. You're going to miss me."

She remembered later when he answered the door the first time, months before, she had indeed given him a second thought.

"I was just saying to myself," he told her, "'I hope that's the UPS person.'"

"Be honest," Em said. "You said UPS guy."

"No, no. I really said *person*. I've been having a very feminist day. Just taught my class about the 19th Amendment."

"Which would be?"

"Female suffrage."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

■

Egghead, Em thought, *nerd. Don't mess with me.* Still, she liked the look of him, straight dark hair, longish, that hung gently around his face, brown eyes that gazed at her steadily, impossibly long eyelashes. "This is a little strange," she said, "but do you think I could trouble you for a glass of water?"

"No problem," he'd said.

His name was William Keach, she knew that from the deliveries, one every three or four weeks, a variety of packages but mostly 5" by 8" rectangles, videotapes probably. Em wondered vaguely what was on them, but he didn't seem like the porn type. Lately, they'd been coming more often. She asked him for a glass of water every time. Her thirst was astounding and seemed to hit her hardest when she got to William Keach's apartment. She could have carried a water bottle, a thermos, but she kept forgetting.

The sixth or seventh time she delivered one of these small packages to William Keach, he said, "Watch this," and began to unwrap the tape. Em put her water glass down and headed for the door.

"No, wait," he said. "It's not anything weird. It's my niece, and I understand she can say *Uncle Billy is my favorite.*"

He put the tape into the player and the face of a redheaded baby girl blossomed onto the television screen. In the background was what Em presumed to be the mother's voice: "Say hello to Uncle Billy, Laura. Tell Uncle Billy who your favorite is." Laura gazed into the camera and a smile spread slowly across her face. Em noticed she had a rather adult-looking gap between her front teeth. After another round of prompting, Laura said something that might have been Uncle Billy is my favorite, but sounded much more like Uncle Billy did me a favor, and then, without any prompting at all, baby Laura said, I'm a busy girl, bye, and walked away. William Keach laughed until his eyes filled with tears, and the sight of it made Em feel faint, and then it was as if a bubble had burst in her chest. This is what they mean, she thought, by a breaking heart. All these last months must have worn down the catch that kept it whole, and now in a stranger's house, she was going to fly apart.

"My sister," William Keach was saying, "is the world's most faithful maker of video tapes. She used to send cookies and homemade bread. But it would go bad. You know, no preservatives." He turned to Em. "It's just the two of us, and she's in Boston. But you already know that probably. School's done in three weeks and I can't wait to get back there."

"It's far away," Em said.

"It is." He put his hand on her shoulder. "Are you okay?"

They looked at each other for a long moment.

"I think I'm going to kiss you," Em said.

"All right," William Keach said, and so she did.

Later and always she would remember that kiss as the best of her life, even after years had passed and she was married to Daniel Woolf. At the time, she seemed to know already and so paid close attention to every gesture and touch. She would remember that, as they moved closer to each other, the scent of William Keach was the strange but glorious mixture of Paco Rabane—a cologne she knew from a boyfriend years before—and strawberries. Over his shoulder she saw a silver tin gleaming on the counter, and what she said before he drew his index finger across her lips was *you had pie for lunch.* She thought afterwards he must have done that not to shush her but to get the lay of the land. Then she felt his hand splayed open in the exact middle of her back, guiding her body toward his. She tasted the strawberry pie on his lips and inside his mouth. They were exactly the right height for this kiss: William Keach was maybe four inches taller than she was, Em calculated, and so she was obliged to lean her head back, angle her whole body into a kind of rubbery faint, to float. He held her carefully, lightly, securely. She opened her eyes and watched him, his long dark eyelashes lying almost on his cheek reminded Em of a sleeping, contented child. His niece Laura probably looked the same way. Every so often, he stopped kissing her and rubbed his cheek against her face. Em felt a faint sandiness. He had not shaved, not yet. He had not been any more prepared for his kiss than she was. She thought about what it would be like to be undressed by William Keach, she tried to remember how many buttons there were on her uniform shirt. She drew his head farther down to hers and, turning her head to kiss his ear, tasted salt. She wondered if he had already been crying, missing his sister, his niece, maybe his parents, lying on his back on the couch so that tears would have run into his ears. With the tip of her tongue, she followed the path these tears might have taken, and kissed his eyes, first right then left, until he opened them. He breathed the word *oh*, like a kind of sob, and tightened his grip on her.

"I'm messing up your schedule, aren't I?" he finally said. "You folks are supposed to do your deliveries in like two and a half minutes."

"They're cutting me some slack these days."

"Because you're so good."

"Because my mother is dying."

William Keach nodded. She could see it made sense of things for him. "I'm really sorry," he said.

"Me too," she said. "Thanks." She took a step back to lean against the wall beside the television. He braced his arms, placed his palms flat against the wall on either side of her face. He dropped his head so that his right temple rested on her left shoulder and the end of his nose touched her neck.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

■

"So how much longer could you stay?" he said.

Em looked at her watch. "About another three minutes."

Later she thought he'd said, *well then we better make the most of it.*

Nothing like that had ever happened in her life, nor would it again. Amnesia, she thought. I forgot who I was. The kindness of strangers. It's this weather: in an inversion, the air just stays where it is and so there is a reversal in the normal temperature lapse rate, the temperature rising with increased elevation instead of falling. It sounded like magic. It sounded like kissing one of your deliveries. Shouldn't it be the other way around? Shouldn't he be kissing you? Out of gratitude, out of look what you brought me? How wonderful if the parcel delivery business were to become like chimney sweeping and your customers got to kiss you for luck as you were going out the door.

On the third to the last day of her mother's life, Em started to drive her out east into the mountains. Her mother woke up saying she felt stronger than she had in months, she got dressed without any help in what she called her traveling clothes—a skirt and sweater she'd made herself, knee socks and boots—but there was a queer light shining in her face. Em remembered it as the light of a solar eclipse they had seen together, the summer she was fifteen. They'd walked around outside like they were lost or alien, amazed at the planet they'd landed on. It was because the light was so shimmery, everything the slightest bit out of focus and edged with silver. Haloed. Em and her mother felt a little manic. They wanted to touch everything, get that light on their hands, but Em was afraid too. There was something dangerous about it. You wouldn't want to see that kind of light very often. It would make you too tired. After a while you'd do anything to get away from it. Such strange light would show you how dull your life had always been, how safe, how wrong you'd been in your estimation of it. You'd finally see what you'd been missing, and it would be hard to bear.

She was reminded at first of what the girl selling chocolate bars had said to her mother: you'll get better, don't worry. For a second, Em felt her heart open to take in the possibility of her mother's recovery, opened the way doors were opened for her every day: that moment of mystery and expectation before the face appeared, and then hope and delight on that face. But then she knew. This was her mother's last push, the kick at the end. It would all be over very soon.

So they drove east, Em thinking maybe they'd have a nice lunch at Ruth's Diner. But when she was almost to the monument, the This Is The Place, her mother shifted suddenly in her seat.

"No," she said. "Sweetheart. Let's go out to the lake instead."

"Mom," Em said. "To see what?"

"To see? Who said anything about see?"

So Em turned the car around. You can do that in Salt Lake City, turn a car around in the middle of the street. In fact, Ted told her when he came to her high school graduation, Brigham Young insisted on wide streets that could accommodate a team of oxen making a U-turn. She got on Interstate 80, and just as she pulled into traffic, it began to snow.

"May 3rd," she said. "And would you look at this?"

"Is it really snow?" her mother said.

"Maybe it's locusts."

For years, this had been a joke between them, snow and locusts, after Em learned in ninth grade history that God had sent a plague of locusts to Salt Lake to ruin the crops and make the Mormons more watchful, more attentive to their faith. And then, in his infinite kindness and mystery, God sent a huge flock of seagulls to eat the locusts. Together Em and her mother had a riddle that began "How can you tell snow from locusts in Utah?" but there wasn't ever any answer. The question was the whole joke. Now, driving west, Em found herself watching for black flakes to hum down and settle over the lake. Her mother bent forward and peered up through the windshield, then sat back and shut her eyes.

When they reached the eastern shore of the lake, Em asked her mother where she wanted to go. "Antelope Island, Mom?" she said, picturing a chance meeting with Daniel Woolf. She thought of him hiking the wildlife refuge looking for widowed animals, trying to get them back into circulation. She thought about kissing him. She though of Billy Keach, whom she knew she'd never see again.

"Salt Aire," her mother said, meaning the old boardwalk, the arcade, closed for years and all but fallen down.

"There's nothing there, Mom. I don't know if we can even get to it."

But her mother kept silent, so Em pulled off 80 onto an access road, rutted, parts of the right lane drifted over with sand. The snow kept on, falling more lightly as they headed away from the Wasatch. It met the back windshield in huge wet blots. Em stopped by the path leading to the old front entrance of the Salt Aire Palace. She thought there was something dignified and cagey in the building's dilapidation, how it looked all right from the front—in need of just a little new glass, a little paint, some yardwork. But you could see if you looked carefully that it was a shell, there was nothing inside, probably not even floorboards, not even beams to mark off the upper and lower promenades.

"I've always thought," Em's mother said, and then she paused. "I don't know if somebody told me this or

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

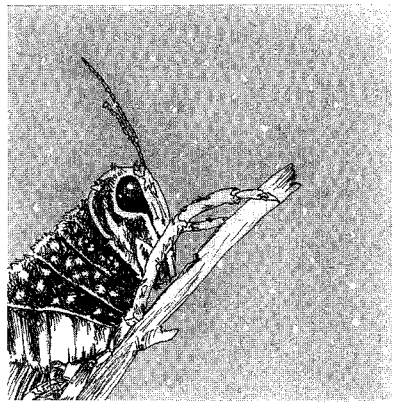
■

what. But I heard an old woman lives in there. And if you knock on the door, she'll answer and say she's Brigham Young's last wife. Susan."

"You want me to go see?" Em said, and her mother nodded.

And Em thought this, running up the stairs to the front door of the old place: All these years and she's never seen me at work. She's never seen how I do it. She's seen me do everything else, from the very beginning, but she's never seen me drive to a specific address, knock on the door of a stranger's house and hand something over.

She felt her mother's eyes, watching, and then she became acutely aware of her own empty hands, realization like sudden pain. What if the door did actually open, and she had nothing to give? What if Susan, or anybody, looked out at her and said Yes? Susan with her hair grown blinding white from age and sun, from bathing in salt and disappointment. Sometimes it happened that Em had to knock on a door not to deliver a package but to ask a question, for directions, ask if the person she was looking for still resided at that address. So she would ask Susan if it was true what she'd heard, what her Utah history teacher had told her, how God sent locusts to eat the first harvest and then seagulls to eat the locusts, and why? And why not again, today, right now? How can you tell when the clouds rise, piling over Bountiful, when the day darkens so slowly? Em would ask her, how do you know it's snow and not the plague with teeth come to chew up your heart and spit it into the lake?



When they got home, Em saw that all the strength, all that fantastic, opalescent light had run out of her mother's face. She undressed her mother carefully, first sitting her down on the edge of the bed to pull off her shoes and knee socks. Then she bent and gathered her mother around the waist, took her up like a dance partner or an armful of flowers, gladiolus, iris, something thin, reedy in the middle. She pulled her mother's sweater up over her head, unbuttoned her corduroy skirt at the waist and slipped it down over her mother's hips, held her hand while she stepped free. She turned her mother away from her and unhooked her bra, slid the straps forward and down her arms. She lifted a nightgown from where it lay folded under the bed pillow and eased it down over her mother's head. She helped her mother into bed, covered her and sat down across from her in Ted's chair. She reached over to turn on the lamp, *Pedro*, but her mother said, "Don't."

"Tell me the true story of it, Mother," she said.

"Not yet,"

"When?"

"Later."

Every night through Em's childhood, her mother read to her, always beginning with the words, you know, this could be a true story. And then Em remembered the look on her face, the one Ted described, emptiness, like the sky before snowfall. The stories seemed to be about her, Em. She thought her mother picked books that her daughter would want to take into herself that way, stories she would willingly confuse, mistake for her own. If there were adults in the story, a mother and a father, Em would of course imagine the mother as her own. But the father. The father was made of smoke or snow, insubstantial, always on his way from one state to another

Ted Ames said he remembered Mary Anne Stanley in a blue dress, walking ahead of him one spring evening. She must have seemed like a body of water he was coming closer and closer to, an ending he was about to reach. And some days, it must still be that everywhere he looks, she's there, walking away, carrying her child, just ahead of him, a blue dream in the twilight.

Em sat awake all that night in the chair her father made, all night she had the sense she was looking at her mother from the embrace of her father's bones. The moon grew liquid on her mother's traveling clothes. Soon, Em believed, they would both be leaving Salt Lake forever. She listened for her mother's voice, telling her about the great, loveless world, and how she would move through it. How the world buoyed you up and that was a kind of affection, how chance was like love, out there waiting for your arrival, waiting for you to stop, take in the long view and say, this is the place. And that the handwriting was always on the wall.

Years later Em would float with Ellen Woolf in the Great Salt Lake off Antelope Island, suspension, really, is what it felt like. She could raise her head and see Daniel Woolf walking along the beach with their daughter, Mary Anne. *You could not drown in this*, Ellen had just said, *except you could. You could drown in just a little pool of water.* She was ten and very wise and bold. She had said some months before that Em should marry her father, the way they were doing things wasn't right, wasn't fair. And so Em had. Now when they rose and walked out of the lake, she saw their bodies were crusted with salt, which dried and whitened in the sun. *Like cod*, Ellen said, *Daddy, we're preserved in salt. We'll last forever.* On her husband's lips Em could taste it, even though he hadn't gone in swimming, even though, as far as she knew, he hadn't cried for a long time. □

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Grant

A Story by Dallas Wiebe

The day I received my Master of Fine Arts degree was a glorious day. I had finished my M.F.A. program in two years and I felt on top of the world. I congratulated the other graduates. They congratulated me. The faculty members congratulated all of us. I congratulated myself. After the clumsy graduation ceremony, we all moved to the McGonagall Bar and Garden for some *de rigueur* drinking. The bar was the local hangout for the writing students. It was named after William McGonagall, one of the great bad poets. The owner thought it was all funny. We thought it was funny. The faculty thought it was funny. It all seemed so wonderful and funny. But, as we were taught in our fiction writing classes, it's a good idea to foreshadow what is to come. I have to tell you that the day I received my M.F.A. was probably the day in my life when I was as naîve as I ever was or ever will be and I was twenty-four years old. What I'd been taught was how to write, not what the world of literature is all about. My understanding of what the literary world is all about came when I received my first check from my writer's grant. I have now lived on that grant for two years.

I might as well tell my story in a standard story fashion, the way I was taught. Now that you know how it is going to end, I will go back to the beginning and fill out the details of my career that didn't happen. I must say that my story began when my advisor Alejo Cortezar, Third World minority and all that, asked me at the McGonagall Bar and Garden to stop by and see him before I left Ayer, Massachusetts, where I lived because it was cheap and because the name of the town had a poetical ambience. The poet Frederick Fanning Ayer, who donated a library to the city, was a scion of the Ayer family that manufactured patent medicines in Lowell and helped found the city of Ayer. Thus putting their family name on the map. I didn't especially admire Frederick Fanning Ayer's 1,266 page book *Bell and Wing* (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1911), but I did admire the huge portrait of him that hung over the check-out desk in the library he donated to that dying city. For me it was an easy commute on the "T" into Boston and to my twice weekly classes at Southwestern University. I always enjoyed that one hour ride because it gave me time to compose my thoughts and edit my poems.

It was Sunday, June 23, 1996, 8:30 a.m. when I locked my empty apartment in Ayer for the last time. I had shipped out my clothes and books, not ever having any furniture worth keeping, and took my one suitcase and walked down to the "T" platform in downtown Ayer. All I took with me when I left my apartment on Hemans Street was my plane ticket from Logan Airport back to Wichita, Kansas, my M.F.A. diploma and my copy of my thesis entitled *The Ominous Clam*. The "T" from Fitchburg into Boston was on time and I left Ayer with high hopes for my life. For the last time I passed through Littleton, Acton, West Concord and all the familiar stops. It was like saying goodbye, especially when the "T" passed Walden Pond. I was riding the old Fitchburg Line that Thoreau talks about. I had always felt a part of all that each time I passed there. When I first came to Ayer, I read *Walden* on my commute. Now I felt a little sadness that I might not see it again. It's just a pond, but what a pond. In Kansas they'd call it a lake.

I got off at North Station and took the subway to Newton Centre where Alejo lived. It was a glorious day and when I got off the mass transit, the sun was shining, the grass was greening, there was a small wind and it was hot. I felt on top of the world with my one-way plane ticket, my diploma and my book manuscript. In the back of my mind I kind of, no, actually, expected Alejo to tell me how to get it published. After all, I figured, that's what writing was all about, to get published. And, in my ignorance, I thought that that was the next logical step in my career. You write *The Ominous Clam*, you get your degree, your advisor helps you get published, you get a job and then you can earn a living by teaching and writing and then can write poetry for the rest of your life. It was all so pat, such a cliché and I had bought into it. It was all, as they used to say in Kansas, slicker'n snot on a doorknob.

When Alejo Cortezar opened his front door to let me in, he seemed in a somber mood. I wondered how he could be depressed, which he usually was, on such a wonderful day. I remember also thinking that he was not going to ruin my day. I was too happy to let his continual depression take me down in what turned out to be momentary happiness. He had on his usual Southwestern t-shirt, his usual Levi's, his usual sandals. His brown, curly hair was combed. He had a martini in his left hand and had clearly already started his drinking for the day even though it was just 1:15 in the afternoon. He took me into his book-lined study and told me to sit down.

He sat behind his desk and took out of a side drawer his copy of *The Ominous Clam*. He stared across the desk at me and said, "Look, Mr. Moore. This is a first-rate piece of work. It's an excellent book. There are some

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

poems in here that are as good as anything being published today, which isn't saying a whole hell of a lot because of the mediocrity of contemporary poetry. Nowadays it seems that anyone can write poetry and anyone does. No great ones like Eliot, Pound, Yeats. Just commonplace minds spewing out commonplace lines. But you, Jules Moore, have a touch. Your poems like 'Kissing Mother Goodby,' 'Father's Last Gasp,' 'Mama Makes a Quilt,' 'A Kansas Boyhood,' 'At My Brother's Obsequies' and 'Who Killed My Buffalo' are good enough to go into *American Poetry Review* or *Kenyon Review* or *Poetry (Chicago)* or *Antaeus* or any of those. No question about it. But, in spite of all that, I asked you to stop here before leaving Southwestern so that you could, with me, consider your future career. As your advisor I have a stake in your career too. I'll be right back."

When Alejo Cortezar returned, he brought two martinis, one for him and one for me. I usually don't drink martinis, but I was in a festive mood. I was floating in my chair, when Alejo said, "Are you sure you want to be a poet?" He wasn't smiling when he said it. I thought at first it was a joke. I thought I already was a poet. I thought I was part of the poetic brotherhood after my two years in the writing program. He wasn't joking and said somberly, "I think you ought to consider going for a writer's grant to support you after you leave here." I was in ecstasy. With a published poet like Alejo Cortezar supporting me I was certain to get a grant. I sipped my martini and began to realize that something else was going on. There was something else. It started to come out when Alejo said, "Are you sure you want to continue writing poetry?" I said that of course I wanted to continue writing. That was why I had studied. Then he said, "But suppose there was a reason not to write?" I told him that I couldn't imagine anything short of death that would be a reason not to write. Cortezar smiled for the first time and said, "I have access to a lot of grant money. In fact, I helped raise it all from private sources." My suspicions seemed silly but I said, "What were the private sources?" Cortezar laughed a little and said, "The published poets."

Alejo Cortezar unlocked the center drawer of his desk and took out a folder. "You see this folder?" he said. "It contains the blueprint for a whole new poetic scene here in America. As of now the contents are the privilege of only forty poets. You know all their names. You've read their work. They're all widely published. They've come together to raise $4,000,000 to be given in grants to unpublished poets like yourself. The stipulations for receiving one of these grants are very simple. You understand that in telling you this I am trusting you. I'll tell you the rest if you'll promise me that you will never tell anyone what went on here today. It's like a lawyer-client relationship, except you're the lawyer and I'm the client. You must never tell anyone about these grants. They will be divulged only to certain individuals and be given very discreetly."

When I agreed to complete confidentiality and agreed that I was interested in a writer's grant, Alejo continued. "You were selected as one of the candidates for one of these grants because you were, if not the best, at least one of the best of our students. Your career is virtually assured." I thought something was just too good so I said, "What are the stipulations for receiving the grant?" "Well," Alejo continued, "first of all you will receive for two years $40,000 per year for a total of $80,000. It's all tax free. You can live where you want to. You can do what you want to up to a point. You can travel, vacation, get married, have children, get a job." I asked, "Is that all? What about writing?" Alejo Cortezar put down his martini, stared across the desk at me and said, "That's the most important stipulation. If you accept the grant you must agree never to write another poem or ever to publish a poem." It all dropped into place. It all began to come clear. I began to realize that my suspicions weren't wrong. I said, "You mean you are preempting my career. You're buying me out. You're buying me off." "That's putting it crudely," he said, "but you're essentially right. You see it begins like this. Those of us who are published and established in the universities must have students to keep our jobs. We have to keep on, in my case, turning out poets. But what happens to the twenty poets we graduate each year? Mostly they disappear because they never had a chance in the first place. They register at Southwestern, pay their money, get a degree and leave. We treat them well. We teach them all we can. When they leave they get some kind of a job, take out a subscription to *Writer's Digest*, each year they buy a copy of *Writer's Market* and spend the rest of their lives trying to write and publish poetry. F&W Publications makes a fortune off those would-be writers. We know most of them won't ever make it. No threat from them."

I looked out at the sunny skies. I reset my thought. I gathered myself and asked for another drink. Alejo came back and we sat and stared at each other. I was beginning to see the whole picture, except that we both knew that there was something else. I sipped and said, "But so what? So most of the graduates don't become published poets. What of it?" Alejo opened the folder. "The student part isn't the real problem. That problem takes care of itself. It's the publication part that the money is for." I smiled and said, "But if they're not publishing, what's there to be concerned about?" "It's not them we're concerned about. It's graduates like you that we're watching. You could publish your poems. *The Ominous Clam* is what is called

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

nowadays 'a breakthrough.' The title is silly. The titles of the poems are silly, but the poems are great. Your satire, parody, burlesquing. It's amazing the way you can turn the ludicrous into the lyrical. You're an original. You could succeed as a poet." I flinched and asked, "It seems that you're telling me that if I accept the grant I'm selling my possible success, that I'm giving up my possibilities of publication." "That's just it," Alejo said. "We don't want you to publish. There are too many poets and the field is overcrowded. Why do you think established, main line poets are publishing in little magazines? Why do you think established, main line poets are competing for those rinky-dink prizes that the journals are offering? Those things used to be just for amateurs. Not anymore. What we have is poetical overpopulation. We are breeding ourselves, or rather graduating ourselves, out of existence. There's not enough room for so many poets. There aren't enough journals for all of us to keep on publishing. The book companies can't publish all the publishable poets. There's no way it all can continue. We've got to cut off poetry at the pass."

Alejo was getting excited. "Then," he said, "there's the matter of prizes and grants." I flinched. I knew, I thought, what was coming. "What about those prizes and grants?" I asked. "We give them to each other," he remarked just as if he were saying you got a "B" on your poem. "Don't you realize that I sit on committees that give out the prizes and the grants? This year I give prizes or grants to members of the group. Next year those members sit on the committees and give me grants or prizes. Why do you think those New York poets keep raking in all that money? Why do you think they keep getting all those prizes? They're all part of a system. They take care of each other. That's why poetry is so healthy in New York. They keep out the upstarts. You wouldn't have a snowball's chance there. Besides, you're probably better than they are and they can't stand to let you in."

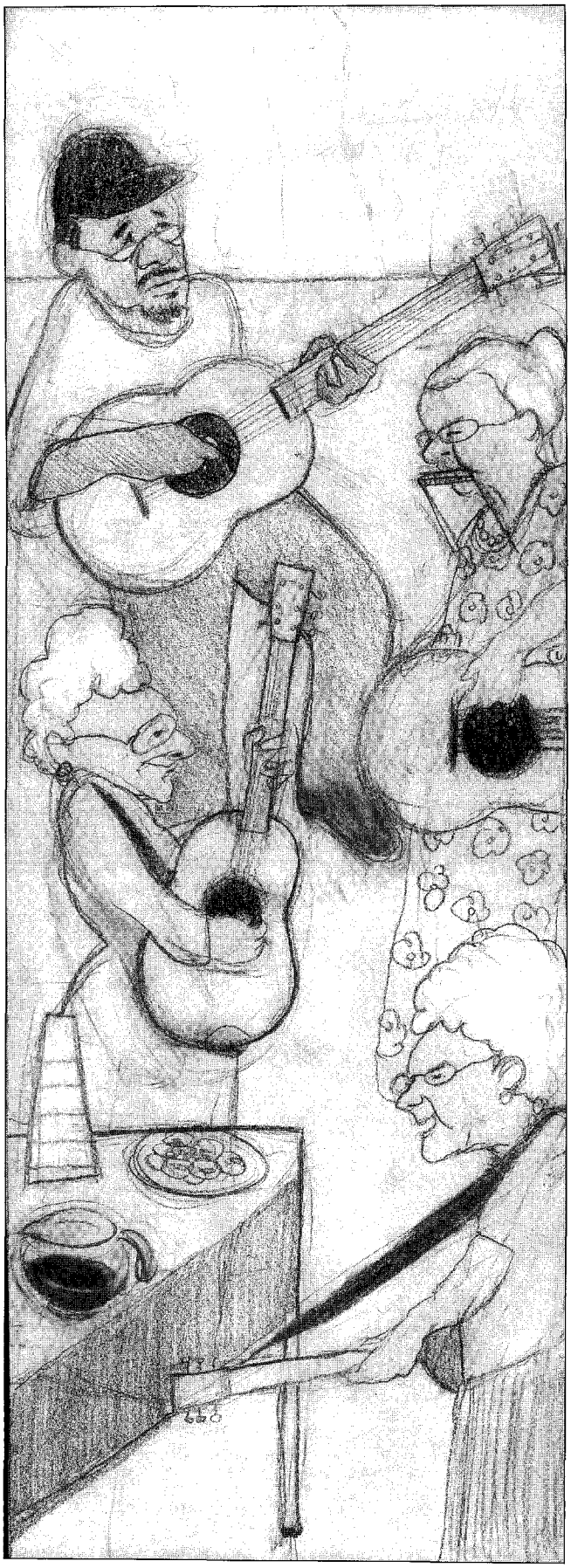
I regrouped. "What you're saying is that you forty or so poets are going to buy off the competition. You are going to reserve the world of poetry publication for yourselves." "That's generally right. Us forty or so poets, as you have said, tithe. We each put in ten percent of our salaries for the grants. We already have twenty-four writing program graduates on grants. They all seem satisfied." "But," I whispered, "that's all so elitist. It's just another establishment that controls the competition. It's a monopoly. It's all self-serving." Alejo sneered for the first time. "All right," he said. "What do you want? Do you want our poetry to die? Do you want our nation to be without poets? That's what will happen if we continue in the way we are now. If you really love poetry, can't you give up your own aspirations in order for it to survive? Can't you set aside your ego for the highest of endeavors? It's people like you who will kill poetry, not me or my forty or so colleagues. We'll preserve it. A new horde of poets will kill it. It's you who will destroy the art, not us." The cheapness of his arguments made me feel like weeping. There was something tawdry about it all.

I looked at Alejo Cortezar, a successful man because of his minority status, a man who had never been outside the U.S., and said, "Did you say $40,000 a year for two years?" "That's right," he said. "Forty thousand a year for two years." I sipped the last of my martini, smiled and said, "Where do I sign?" He pulled out some papers. "Sign here," he said. "I've got the application all filled out. I even have your first check ready." "By the way," I said as I left, "can I keep *The Ominous Clam*?" "Of course," he whispered, "just don't publish it or anything else."

That was two years ago when I left Newton Centre and flew back to Kansas. So my story completes itself. It comes round to the beginning and resolves in where and what I am now. I got my $80,000. I married my high school sweetheart with it. I bought a nice little house with it. I've mostly supported myself and my wife and my one-year-old daughter Sally with it. Cortezar has published two books of poems in the last two years, *The Duende of Harvard Square* and *Boston Mambos*. He has also published some 160 poems in journals. He's won two $20,000 prizes. He's received two $10,000 grants. I quit writing. I've not tried to publish anything. I've kept my bargain. I figure that if I sold out I might as well be honorable about it. I work in a hardware store repairing lawn mowers. I'm really very good at it. I'm a better repairman than I was a poet.

Some days I get out *The Ominous Clam*, blow off the dust and read what I wrote. There's a poem in the book that I don't even remember writing. It's called "Dust in Your Eyes." It's about growing up in Kansas, in all that dust. Strangely enough, it's also about repairing a lawn mower. My wife Sarah knows about the grant, but she too likes to read my poetry. She asked me one time about the title of my book. I grinned and said, "Don't you get it? It's the ominous clam before the storm. Originally it was just a typo, but I kept it." Sarah laughed and said, "I love your poem called 'A Kansas Romance.' I really like that part where you say that kissing me recalls for you eating cold watermelon at a Fourth of July picnic. I can almost weep where you write in the poem 'Who Killed My Buffalo,' 'My love for you is the only ominous calm I know.'" I do love my wife a lot but I've never had the heart to tell Sarah that the poems are about Sissy Putzkammer, who was the manager of a massage parlor in Newton. □

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



MIKE OLSON

The Ladies of West Rarington Falls Get Down

A Story by Michael Fedo

Each Tuesday night at 7:30 for the past three weeks, the ladies of West Rarington Falls have assembled in the gymnasium annex at the local elementary school. These dowagers from the Wednesday Book Club, West Rarington's Symphony Auxiliary, and the Garden Society, gather together to experience the blues.

On this evening a large urn of fresh-brewed coffee dominated the card table stationed just inside the annex doorway, framed by two platters of home-baked banana-carob chip cookies. Flora Loeventhal, chairwoman of the group, dropped two lumps of sugar into a china cup of coffee and handed it to a slump-shouldered, white-haired black man standing behind her. Honey Do Brooks, legendary Delta blues musician, nodded his thanks, and turned to chat with one of the women who was asking him about a lick she'd heard on one of his 1940s recordings she'd borrowed from the library.

Other women, hefting acoustic guitars, clustered around Mr. Brooks, one of them stretching her stubby pink fingers across frets, attempting a B-flat fifth chord Brooks had earlier demonstrated in the corridor.

Presently Flora Loeventhal, a retired high school history teacher, stepped to the front of the room and announced, "All right, ladies, time to get down!"

Honey Do Brooks pulled up a folding chair, sat, and straddled his guitar.

Ms. Loeventhal beamed at the more than two dozen women taking their seats in the annex before addressing them. "Now, ladies, it gives me great pleasure to present our most distinguished guest, Mr. Honey Do Brooks."

Brooks waved at the white women seated before him.

Flora Loeventhal smiled at Brooks, then continued her introduction. "Mr. Brooks was born and raised in Biloxi, and has written more than 300 blues songs over a career spanning fifty-two years. He's made several recordings, and despite his advancing age still manages to perform at many blues clubs and other venues like this one. Without further ado, let's extend a hearty welcome to Mr. Honey Do Brooks."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The ladies clapped; Honey Do drained the coffee, then picked up his guitar. He began playing a raggedy number, plucking one string at a time. His eyes closed, his head bobbed, and finally his voice emerged, raw and grainy, quiet at first, then building slowly as he sang:

"Ain't got no money,
Ain't got no home.
Ain't got no nothin'
I can call my own.
Life full of misery and pain
Goin' carry these hungry
blues on ol' railroad train . . ."

At the conclusion of the number the ladies applauded. Honey Do nodded, acknowledging his reception. "Thank y'all so much," he mumbled softly. "Lady here, gimme cup of coffee, but a blues man like a bit of whiskey in his java. But I don't suppose they be keeping no jar of that here." He sighed as the audience greeted his remark with subdued laughter.

He peered at them over the tops of half-glasses. "Well, just exactly what is it you all's brung ol' Honey Do up here for?" He looked at Flora Loeventhal.

"We'd like you to teach us the blues, Mr. Brooks," she said, smiling brightly. "As I told you on the phone last month, we are a group of women with broad cultural interests, but with little knowledge of the blues. We'd like to better understand them, and perhaps even attempt to write our own blues music. We may not seem like your typical blues crowd, Mr. Brooks, but I assure you our interests are catholic."

"That cool," said Honey Do. "I be an ol' Baptist, myself. All my people be stomp-down Baptist."

Flora turned away from Honey Do, smiling and arching an eyebrow. "As I was about to say, many of our ladies have taken guitar lessons in anticipation of your visit, and some of us have even started to develop, shall we say—*chops*—on the harmonica—er—blues harp."

Honey Do fingered a B7 chord, strummed it, and slid up a fret and back. He smiled a gummy, toothless smile.

"Get down, Honey Do! Get down!" called a matron in the front row.

"Ma'am, ol' Honey Do's always down. That's where the blues comes from. Bein' down. You be up, you ain't gonna do no blues." He cranked on a couple of tuning pegs. "Tell y'all what we gonna do. You ladies tell ol' Honey Do what you gets the blues from. What gets you down in the dumps, so's you feel like you's 'bout done in. I never did play for no buncha ol' white ladies before, so I don' know."

One of the women in the second row stood. She removed her hat and handed it to the woman seated next to her. "Before we get down to business, I have a question," she said, smiling. "Would you mind telling us how you came by the name, Honey Do? I bet that isn't the name your mother gave you when you were born."

"No. It ain't. But I been Honey Do, most ever since I remember. I be the youngest of 'leven children. Momma always sayin', 'Honey, do this for me, all right, baby? Honey, do that.' Pretty soon, ever'body callin' me Honey Do. Anyway, Honey Do ain't so bad. Back home, ever' time a baby come along, why Granddaddy get out the Bible and run his finger down a page 'till he come to a name. Whatever that name is, why they give it to the baby. So that's how I come to be named Segub. You can look it up. First Chronicles, second chapter, verse 21. 'An' afterward Hezron went in to the daughter of Machir the father of Gilead, who he married when he was threescore year old; an' she bare him Segub.' I be Segub too, 'cept you ain't never gonna call a young 'un no name like Segub. Even Granddaddy called me Honey Do."

"That tune you played a few moments ago was excellent," said a woman wearing a lavender pants suit with a Hohner blues harp poking out of her breast pocket. "I'm sure all of us here can appreciate it. But it doesn't exactly speak to our experiences as older white women."

"You ain't never been hungry, that it?" Honey Do said.

"Well, hardly. In fact, judging by the way some of us look, it's just the opposite." She chuckled.

"Shoot—you don' have to be hungry to get the blues. The blues is how you feelin'. Lemme tell you a Charley Parker story. You cats know Bird? Now, Bird, he had the blues real bad," Honey Do said. "But he was a wise man, and one time somebody asked how he made his music, and he said, if you don' live it, it don' come out of your horn. Horn, guitar, piano, don' make no difference. See, I been hungry in my life, an' I can play about it an' sing about it. Same thing with you ladies." Then Honey Do started playing, "I Got A Woman Mean As She Can Be."

He stopped after six bars. "Y'all got a man mean as he can be?"

"That's a little out of our element too," Flora said. "Though a few of us might think we got a man dumb as he can be." The ladies laughed.

Another woman in a gray bouffant and large jade earrings stood. "One day last week, my daughter was having difficulty with her son's nanny. The nanny wanted a day off to register for some classes at the community college. Clara—that's my daughter—said no, Aaron had the flu and needed someone with him. Anyway, I thought I'd try that as a blues number." She picked up her Epiphone guitar, strummed a C chord arpeggio, cleared her throat, and sang:

"My girl, Clara got a nanny for her little boy.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

■

Nanny for her little boy, uh-huh.
Nanny for her little boy, ooo-ooo."

She stopped. "That's as far as I've gotten. What do you think?"

After a pause, Honey Do summoned a smile and said, "That be all right. I can dig it." Honey Do nodded, then lowered his voice. "What make you ladies cry?" he solicited gently.

"It's interesting you should ask that, Mr. Honey Do," said a seventyish woman in a navy suit. "When I was a little girl, my father used to go around the house singing 'Go Tell Aunt Rhody,' and every time he got to the part about the goslings crying because their mother died, why I'd just sob myself, because I knew how I'd feel if my mother had died." She smiled. "Is 'Go Tell Aunt Rhody' a blues song?"

"Lordy," said Honey Do, rolling his eyes. "Wonder what ol' B. B. King say about this?"

Another woman said something about how terribly animals are treated these days, and that this inhumanity is enough to give any sensitive soul the blues. Several women applauded the remark.

"Lordy," Honey Do said again. "Well, I know you ladies dig food, so how 'bout 'Gimme A Pig Foot And A Bottle Of Beer'?"

"I'm sorry, we can't have beer in the school either," said Ms. Loeventhal. "But I should have inquired as to what you might like for a snack." She smiled apologetically. "We don't have pigs' feet. Only coffee and cookies."

"Lady, that's a song. Doctor tells ol' Honey Do, go easy on the salt these days. Got me high blood pressure, so I don' be eatin' no pig feet. I *sing* 'em." He paused and shrugged then looked at Flora. "I don' know 'bout this. But hey, let's try somethin' different. Ain't none of you ladies been lonesome? I be talkin' about that mean lonesome. The lonesome-ist you ever been, and how you so sick from that lonesome that you could just cry. You oughta listen to ol' John Lee Hooker. There's a dude what knows lonesome."

Charlene stood again. "I don't think lonesome applies much to us either. I mean when my husband, Clarence is away on business, I have so many friends that I can call, and right away I'm cheered up. If you've got good friends, I don't see why anyone would ever be lonesome."

"None of your men done up an' leave you?" Honey Do asked.

"He'd better not," one woman asserted. Others chuckled.

"Ladies, what give you pain?" Honey Do asked hopefully. "Blues come from pain. 'Course there's what they call the happy blues too, and that may be what y'alls got."

Flora Loeventhal, who'd been standing near the coffee urn, strode forward and stood near Honey Do. "What you say is unfortunately true, Mr. Brooks. Sadly, we are an altogether happy lot, are we not?" She faced the audience. "Whence cometh our pain? What I'm hearing tonight is that our so-called blues experiences are not from the deep well of tradition, with which Mr. Brooks is so very familiar. But, in the fullness of time, things change. I suspect that's true even of the blues Mr. Brooks so ably performs.

"Maybe the best thing we could do right now is have Mr. Brooks further enlighten us with a few of his favorite blues numbers, and then there will be time for more coffee and cookies. I'm sure our guest will avail himself to any of us who might want to try writing her own blues song, like Charlene."

"Lordy," said Honey Do, shaking his head. "You ladies is somethin' else." He retuned his guitar and ran through a medley of songs by Howlin' Wolf, Mississippi Fred McDowell, Robert Johnson, and Bessie Smith, before Flora put her hand on his shoulder.

"This has been wonderful," she said. "You have enriched us beyond measure, Mr. Brooks. I know we'll be talking about your visit here for many years to come. Now, I'm sure there are those of you who'd like to chat with Mr. Brooks, so while I fetch him another cup of coffee, you get some yourself. Also a big thank you to Dagney Sloan who made the delicious cookies."

Honey Do moaned, and motioned to Flora, who leaned in as he mumbled, "You sure there's no whiskey nowhere 'round here, lady? I'm parched."

While she was shaking her head and apologizing, two women approached the aging blues master, one suggesting a song theme. "I have seven granddaughters and each of them expects me to buy all my Girl Scout cookies from her."

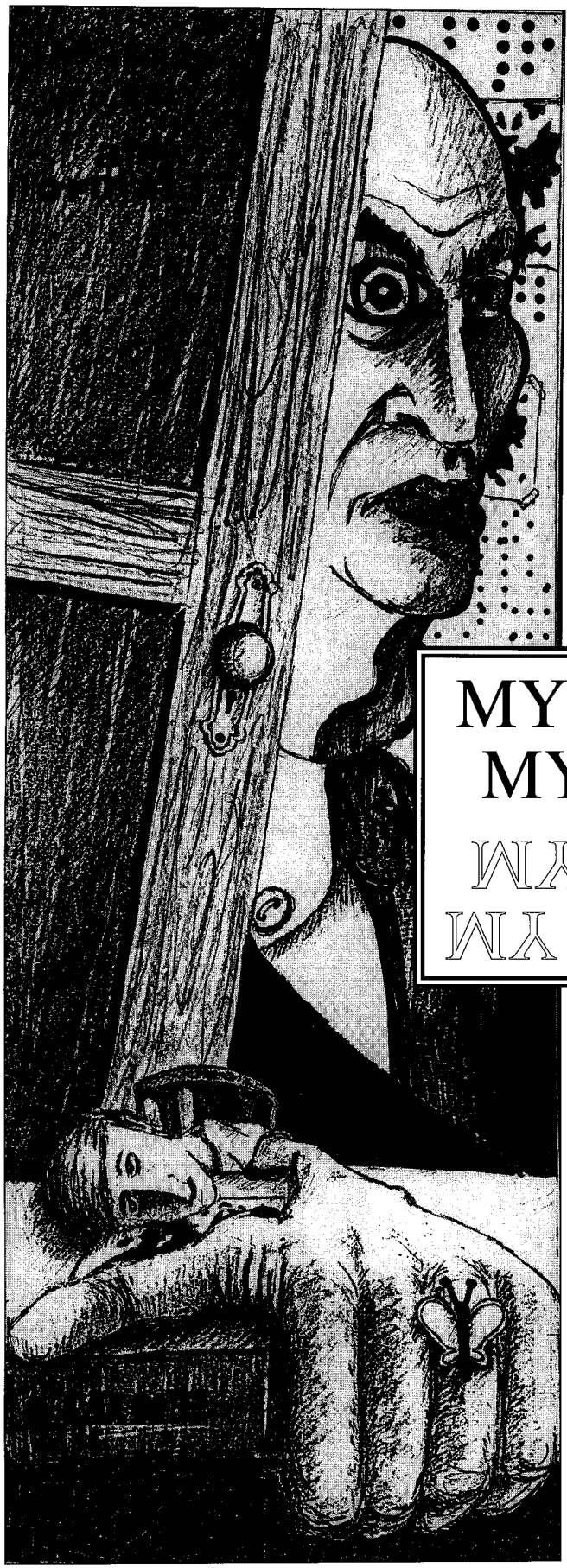
The other woman thought Title IX equity for female college athletes could work well as a blues song.

Twenty minutes later, after most of the blues ladies of West Rarington Falls had departed, Honey Do Brooks was still seated at the front of the room. He was plucking his guitar, mouth agape and eyes vacant, while attempting a melancholy riff for one of the ladies who'd stayed behind to get help with a piece she'd been writing. She beamed as the ancient blues man growled through her lyrics:

"I always dead-head my petunias, yeah.
Dagney and Phyllis cut theirs back.
My 'tunias won the blue ribbon, uh-huh, uh-huh.
Now Dagney and Phyllis got the dead-head
pee-tunia blues. Dead-head pee-tunia blues.
Yeah."

□

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



CHAD HUNTER

MY PSYCHOLOGIST, MY PSYCHIATRIST

I could not distinguish between them except by what we did. I was ten, then eleven. I would not ride the school bus. I always slunk home saying I missed it. I made my mother come to school with me every day, and sit in the lobby so I could wave to her during recess and class changes. In the evenings my father would come home from work, hear my mother's report, and storm upstairs, his weight pounding on the hardwood steps. I would be out of breath with crying, my head in the pillow, waiting to feel what he would do. He never touched me, but several times I was unable to resume breathing, and they'd take me to the emergency room, where a doctor or nurse would look me over, measure my pulse and temperature, and send me home. At night I stole into the bathroom and with my fingernails dug as deeply into my bare arms as I could tolerate.

Eventually, on Saturdays, I was taken to see the psychologist. He had close-cropped black hair and horn-rimmed glasses, and his name was Rudolph and I called him Rudolph the Red-Nosed Shrink. We sat across a pale wood desk in his gray office in a pale brick building, and he showed me Rorschach after Rorschach and we did word associations which I consciously made more and more antonymic. A yellow glare projected from his glasses like a dental light. Every question that he asked me was attached to a form or picture. He was always shuffling papers and opening and shutting drawers, looking for the next approach. Our conversations were long silences interrupted by bursts of interrogation and response. He told my parents, in those short naked sessions when I sat in his bare waiting room while they murmured behind the door, that I was a very depressed kid. Years later I worked for a Department of Behavioral Psychology at a noted think tank, and came away with the conclusion that psychology was the practice of proving the self-evident.

Shuman, the psychiatrist, kept his office in the back part of his tree-hidden home at the end of a suburban lane. We played darts and ate crisp flat cinnamon cookies embedded with almond slivers. We talked about how I felt when I had to go to school, how I felt when I

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

■

A Story by Fred G. Leebron

was sent to summer camp (I had not lasted at the previous two), how I felt about my family.

"Do you hate them?" he said, his pale lined face concentrated in a neutral expression.

I shook my head.

"When you're away at camp, what feelings do you have about your mother?"

"I keep hearing her voice," I said. "Then I look around for her and she's not there."

I was the youngest of five offspring. I did not know to tell him about the time six years before when the youngest sister and I stood poised in an upstairs bedroom, while in the next room my mother lined up our older siblings and whipped them one at a time with a belt. Once we all stood outside the shut door of my parents' room waiting to be called in individually, where my mother sat at her desk under a green lamp and carefully pulled down our pants and spanked us until she was tired. My parents' friends now told them that after four perfect children they deserved someone like me. On the coffee table in the den lay a bright white book with red trim, the cover art a cartoon of a self-reliant child in a cape and tights. *How to Raise a Super Kid.* Dr. Shuman told my parents I was a very depressed kid.

In the spring my oldest sister returned on Easter break from her freshman year at college. While we ate my mother's special London broil and my sister sipped at an iced tea, she talked about her boyfriend and announced their plans to move in together the next year. My father said of course not and my sister just shrugged her shoulders

"Then we won't pay for your college," my father said.

"You don't pay for it anyway," my sister said. "Mom's parents do."

My mother rose barely from her chair and reached my sister's face with a brisk slap. Five fingers, we always called these.

"I'm still moving in with him," she said

"I think we all should go to see Dr. Shuman," I said.

"I am not," my oldest sister said, "going to see your shrink."

For some reason, at the word shrink, I broke into tears, and ran from the table.

In March, near the end of the season, I was hurt in a hockey game, crushed into the boards during the final seconds by a large green jersey. During my check-up, the doctor meticulously felt along my adam's apple, and asked my parents if I had ever behaved erratically or in a difficult manner. My mother and father looked at each other and began talking at once. Apparently I was moody, temperamental, and prone to hyperventilation. I was hospitalized for the next week, and assessed and treated for an enlarged thyroid. Over the ensuing months I had blood drawn every ten days and took six iodide tablets daily. I was still allowed to see Shuman. Another summer of camp approached, and I was worried.

"Will you write me?" I asked him.

"We'll see," he said gravely.

I had never had such cookies—the way they broke into perfect pieces in your mouth, the tips of almonds that emerged like islands to rescue you in a sea of saliva. My parents tried to bribe me with movies and dinners out, but every Friday night I insisted on Shuman. He had a deep, quiet voice and he threw darts with an easy flick of his wrist. He was calm

That summer I began every letter home, "I hate camp." I offered to cut my wrists. My parents wrote back telling me to get control of myself. In later letters I called my mother bitch and my father asshole. From the canteen I bought and stored candy with the greatest mass—regardless of the taste—for my planned escape. I was going with a cabin mate named Trapper, a twelve-year-old who talked of cherry-popping and was from Tennessee. I wrote to Shuman five or six times. "I don't like it here," I said. "We have to do everything all the time. When are you going to write me?" I tried to make my letters take the form of the long answers I knew they all wanted. I imagined his house in the fall, surrounded by bright flames of trees as I rode up the drive in the backseat of my parents' car for the first appointment of the new school year. Perhaps he'd be leaning in the doorway, his elbow cocked, a finger pressed to his forehead in thought. Although that was not the way it ever was—you didn't see him outside the office, you opened and carefully shut two or three sets of doors just to get to him, secured in something like Chinese boxes as if what would happen in there was secret, select, and indiffusible. I never heard from him. My escape was thwarted by the head of the camp, who as punishment stuck me in a cabin with the nine-year-olds.

My letters from camp rest now in my mother's safe deposit box. By the middle of seventh grade I was regarded as relatively normal. I got through high school, then paused before college to take a job as an aide at a psychiatric hospital. I thought—as I would again—that I wanted to be a doctor. In orientation we were taught how to deal with the patients. Don't be afraid to talk with them. Ask what they are thinking. Ask how that makes them feel. Never ask why. □

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

White Butterflies

A Story by C. L. Rawlins

The doctor is good. She speaks as if I were going to answer and then pauses, her head inclined, before she speaks again. Her hair is long, bound at the nape, and it shines like dark, burled wood. She probably charges the earth, but the sponsor will pay. I try not to think about that.

I fell asleep in Kathmandu, my forearms black and split up to the elbow joint, and woke up here, in this compound on Florida's east coast, without my hands.

Time, in this room, is white. The blinds have four white strings that lift or drop them, and a hexagonal wand of white plastic that orients them to the earth or sky. Beyond the glass, the days are green and close. Night is stiff palmetto leaves rattling in the window light.

The cables and the brace keep me immobilized. My feet, they say, will carry me again, and the broken vertebrae will knit, but it takes time. The nurses feed me, change my tubes, and sponge me in my steel web; they wipe me when I shit. But they never speak, and when they're done, they leave.

The doctor sits with me, and talks. Sometimes she reads aloud. She wears no rings, only a fine gold chain around her neck. Her eyes are calm green, netted like the forest edge with rays of gold and pure bark-brown. At first, I felt uneasy. I've always hated being watched. Snow and ice and rock are opaque: they don't look back. On a mountain you trust yourself first, nerve and bone, and your gear second, and then your partner. Even the best tools break. And partners change, so you're left with that negotiated faith: I never minded that.

Can I trust you, Doctor? You look at me with a strange concentration, as if you're trying to shape a thought inside my head. I register your presence, even under pain or drugs. And recall our conversations, though my part is never said.

If we go that far, you'll ask me to choose between steel hooks, or plastic fingers like the pink hands on a doll, saintly hands that only grip, that take no pleasure and give none. I always hated the saints for dying so resignedly. But now I understand: beyond a certain point, pain teaches only pain. I remember the cropped lawn of the church, and the constant wash of sprinklers, and St. Lucy, our lady of cool plaster. The sculptor had made her beautiful and I dreamed of her more than once, with her downcast eyelids and the smooth, white plate on which her eyes reposed, like two plucked fruit.

My eyes are the only part of me that moves. I cherish the bodies of the nurses as they bend and turn about the bed, remembering precisely the weight of a breast, the film of sweat at the edge of a palm, the way my fingers tasted skin.

Some joys are absolute.

When I wake at night, alone, I see peaks in three directions and feel the icy downdraft on my face. My pain is white, the walls are white, the platform of the bed, the sink, the doors, the blinds, the blades and the housing of the ceiling fan, all but the mirror, which in that moment is the glacier looming over Base, winking back at stars.

And in the mirror I see my two eyes and want to turn away. None of this belongs to me. I gave my body to the lens, and my voice to the microphone, describing how it feels to step inside death's reach and dance away. Or partly so.

Though I could meet the sponsor's eyes, I will not. His irises are a light, flat blue, like cities in the rain. I sold myself to him, and I sold my friends. And then I wanted to go so high that money would fade in the distance, covered by clouds. He wants to get down to business, now. The only freedom I have, with no hands, a broken spine, head fixed in a steel frame, my only freedom now is not to speak. Once he brought his wife, the alleged actress, her hair like gin with lemon, coiffed swirls playing strangely with the light. "Maybe he'll talk to her," I heard him say outside the door. "He must have seen her films."

Films? I thought. She practiced a while, then grimaced, then escaped. Beyond the obvious horrors, I

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

■

LEE NYQUIST

must stink. Remember when Frankenstein's monster wakes up? It's like that, except the movie won't stop.

The nurses all wear glaring white but their skins are brown: Dominican, Filipina, Thai. I wonder if they're ordered not to speak. In any case, the doctor choreographs their dance as they scrub and shift my limbs. Then, as pain forms banks and billows, clouds unfolding in the room, she lets me have her eyes.

I want to kill the sponsor. I consider various ways, lacking hands. It's not really his fault; he's a trapper: he simply offered the bait. I took it, and killed us all. He never mentions them. He keeps the clippings in a file someplace, or his employees do. His other employees. I tell myself that guilt and pain are the same.

But pain ends. And he's that other thing, which never ends.

When he speaks—barks—the doctor gives a sharp, dismissive nod and tucks her chin. I've heard them quarreling outside. "At the clinic we'd have much less trouble with the technical side, and I'm sure he'd feel much more. . ."

"Feel?" He cut her off. "That sort of climbing draws the ones that can't. It has to be driven into them, like a nail. Read his file: no wife, no child, no. . ."

I couldn't hear the rest. She came back, and I stared into the depths of the wall. I could hear her breathing deepen and then slow. Then she spoke: "It must bother you, this awful white."

The next morning she set a stubby, green bottle on the sill and intalled a sheaf of rusty needles from the pines outside, and turned to me with a curious softening in her face. "I know you can talk," she said. "I know that."

(Yes) I felt something swell and overflow down my cheek. Why the right eye and not the left? I tried to brush it away, and couldn't. The steel frame creaked. She touched a finger to the stream, and carried it to her lips.

I'd die for you, I thought, but I'm already dead.

She bent until her warm brow touched my throat. I could smell her hair like a field of grass and feel her tears. "I'm so, so sorry," she said. Then she stood, face diminishing. Her shoulders rose and she drew a breath, and turned away. She added a spray of berries, bright red, and then a clutch of larger ones, a venous purple, their contrast delicious to the eye, like the two shades of fresh blood spattered on the snow.

When Base Camp went, the avalanche brushed me aside. My dysentery had driven me far enough that my gassy explosions and curses wouldn't disturb the rest. I heard the slide break loose and assumed that like the others it would miss the camp. I stood up and zipped

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

my coverall. It was cold, but my hands were bare. I could see the tent. It glowed golden with a spot of white, then it disappeared.

It was like being rushed by a huge dog, when I was too young even to say the word: *dog*. It feels the same, that overwhelming weight. But a dog is warm and smells of meat. And an avalanche. . .

Like nothing much at all.

The birds are quick and nameless as they come and go, and the forest is an alphabet of light. I watch the beveled spikes of palm and the tops of the shaggy pines and the glittering crowns of—what? Magnolia? Laurel? Devilwood? Live-oak? At night, as wind comes up, thick leaves squeak against the glass.

The magazines have offers in. At first, *Outside* called every day. Now they send a weekly fax. "Business," he says, and stares. I close my eyes. "Time-Warner wants a piece," he says.

Which one? I'm running short. I'm tempted, but silence is my only power now. Holly and Jay had reached Camp Four, a cave we'd hacked into the rotten ice of a buttress. A cave we'd hacked, Marit and I. And we cached our loads and rappelled. Holly and Jay were on their way to the peak. They couldn't see the glacier fall. With the sleeping pills, they didn't even wake. In the morning they worried when the radio was blank, and jumped bands, and heard frantic Japanese. They traversed, and saw the blankness where Base Camp had been.

The sponsor stalks the three sides of the bed. Where does his money come from? I heard that his uncle described, in loving detail, his process for making surgical staples from plastic that would dissolve in human tissue. It would replace sutures. The sponsor wrote it up that night and called a patent attorney. The uncle sued and lost.

I heard the story before I signed. He'd gone from staples to neoprene wraps and braces, then into wet suits and boating equipment. Then he bought Hi-Kamp, which distributed mountain gear, and then turned his golden gaze to expeditions. Money, I'd told myself, is a resource. Like water, like air. Like flesh.

"As soon as you can talk," he says, "some things will fall in place." With my narration, harrowed-but-brave, they can patch the video with portraits and candids. We were a pretty bunch, all told. Looks are important, he'd said.

Mountains are always there, of course, but a climb is created, like music. Climbing's not a practical existence: it's easy to get free film, but hard to make a life. Boldness and style count among the serious few, and in Europe.

But America loves expeditions: it's war, and you need an army. So we flew off to Asia with ten climbers, two cameramen, a writer, and a recording tech, bound by a net of contracts. My rationale was that one such circus climb would pay for what I loved: two years, light and free. That was the bait.

When the permit came, I recruited Holly, ex-partner and ex-lover, for looks as well as her skill. And she agreed, on condition that we wouldn't team for the summit: "No Barbie-and-Ken stuff. Been there, done that." That clear, she nailed Jay, who was desperately in love with her, and the three of us hustled like fire.

Jay got Max Whittus and Lorie Rugh, the year's Hot Brits. That gave us five young climbers with at least one 8000-meter summit. The supporting cast was mostly friends, hoping for a second summit bid: Lew Browning, Rosie Tamminen, Rasta Cassidy, Beans Taliaferro, and Marit Lund. Marit was a guide, and a Dane. Who ever heard of a Danish mountain guide? But she was.

The writer was Pat Lively, who did the book on Doug Scott's climbs, and wanted one big peak of his own. Burgraff and Liska, the camera techs, soon were known as 'Dum and 'Dee. Cat Cates, Holly's chum from Annapurna, came as the radio operator and sound tech. We got a liaison officer—Lt. Dorje—and hired Big Lal, the cook I'd liked from Atwan III, and he booked forty porters to carry Base Camp in. The porters all went down the week before the slide. Before they left, they held a ceremony for us and gave us prayer scarves. Marit was their favorite, and they draped her in white.

Now the monsoon storms are past, they're probably at work again, digging. If they recover the video boxes, the sponsor might trick up a full-length feature: Hi-Kamp Presents—Death at 19K. Even my injuries can be profitable. The sponsor has photos of me exulting, whole, on various peaks, and doubtless some grisly snapshots from the evacuation. I dreamed of lightning, but now believe they photographed me under the knife. That would play in the tabloids, with a shot of me holding—what?—in my stainless claws. An ice ax? Holly's shapely hand? A flag? Who decides such things?

There's a blue chair in the room, cloth that shimmers like a first glimpse of the sea. The nurses never sit, though they could. I'd never tell.

And she brought a lithograph to hide the blank wall: a river, annealed by low sun, and a floodplain mantled in cottonwoods with leaves like smoke. "Not Wyoming, but it's close," she said. "The Beaverhead Valley in Montana." (Yes) "You've been there?" (Yes) I try to place myself in her gift, where the floodplain ends and the hills begin, the first rank a shadowy plum-brown, the second rosy with reflected light. There are no mountains in the frame.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

■

"Do you trust me?" (Yes)
"Can you say that?" (Yes)
"Will you say that to me?" (No)
"Do you know my name?" (No)
"Stell. Stella Sandlin Morris. Orthopedic surgery, neurology, fine arts."

Dr. Stell? I trust you, but that's a temporary ease. Speak? What could I say? I love you and it doesn't matter now. *Mea culpa maxima.* And why speak when the world sings all around me? Wind in the scrub forest sings. I hear the river now. You sit, so grave and beautiful, with your calm green eyes. And having you there, so quiet, my eyes stray beyond to what moves: a tuft of spanish moss, a leaf extended like a green hand. The coastal scrub's a battlefront, slicing the horizon into fifty thousand planes. I grew up in the West, where whole mountainsides of pine rear up at once, and black lakes flash silver in a stroke.

And you rise that way, all one, and leave. I wish you wouldn't cry. I expect you to be strong, impassive, the ark of all remaining love. I don't want your tears. I have enough to bear: the weight of the dead. The dog's cold breath. The ice.

I loved the highest, farthest peaks because I thought I could not stain them. And I did, with the blood of my friends: Maxfield Whittus. . .Lawrence Rugh. . . Benjamin Taliaferro. . . Lewis Browning. . . Roseanna Tamminen. . .Douglas Cassidy. . . Patrick Lively. . . Owen Burgraff. . . John Liska. . .Catherine Cates. . . Lopsang Dorje. . .Namlal Cha. . . I imagine all of you now, and speak your names to the dark. Marit, Marit Lund. . .

But I know when to stop. Through the window, the squat forest gazes back, Jesuitical: genuflects and winks. I can move a little, now. I can raise my arms and feel the difference in weight: What's the sound of no hands, clapping? What's the sound of light?

On this drowning coast the air is thick with rot. Now I feel the tides. The nurses are vivid and impersonal, like birds. The doctor sits right by me now, close, on the bed. "I wish you'd speak." She rises, and puts fresh berries in the jar. No need to change the pine needles, sharp and permanent. "Please talk to me. If you don't, you'll never heal." She straightens up. "I don't see any need to inform our mutual. . . employer."

Dr. Stell: you tempt me, too. Do you hear it that way? Doctors tell.

At sunset she read the poem about Key West, Stevens, the old executive, free only in his poems, and her voice grew gruff like his. But then it changed and she was the woman in the poem, the one who sang to the sea.

And then she was the sea. I could feel the words where we touched, in the swell of her hip. I could feel her bones. I began to cry, because she was touching me, and the poem was sad, and because she could let it wash over her tongue and taste the grief, and then give it up to the air.

Stella. In the dark I say your name, apart from my litany. I keep it safe.

I can't come back. I won't. He wants to take the worst thing I've ever done and glamorize it. Promote it. He wants to sell whatever soul I may have left. But how can I say any of this, and not be taking part? I wanted to be rich, in my paltry way. Now I'm rich with pain. But no pain could cover the memory. The best poems always break your heart. Tears stream from my eyes, both of them now, like the melt of a glacier or seawater cutting through sand after a wave. I'm here. I'm not. I raise my arm, and her voice stops. We look together at the dressed stub begging like a paw. I put it down.

Nothing in the end makes any sense to me. I think she's going to cry again, but she turns the book and leaves it open on my tray. She's about to leave. My last chance. I draw a long and ragged breath, and raise my head to bear. Myself. Her shoulders lift as she takes a breath in answer, deep and a little torn, and her hands move at her hips, like wings, and then she goes.

There's a very pure sort of climb, my favorite, a shark's fin around 6000 meters, where altitude is not the crux, a route not brutally hard but devious, which begs to be interpreted. Not a conquest, nor theft: a dance.

At first the fear is a strident hiss. But scared clean out of your bones, moving in a trance, you finally get above. And at that moment fear is the carrier wave, a faint crackle under the music. That's why. It's a solitary gift. And soon it passes; it will not abide. So we go back.

An expedition's like a war, a greedy proposition, rife with foolish hates and fatal loves. Despite my ruined guts, Marit, our black-locked Dane with hazel eyes, moved into my tent. I think she'd come partly in hopes of that. I'd seen her around the circuit, and we'd talked. She was good. She was beautiful, in the way that women who spend their lives on mountains are. But that's not what I mean. She was strong, upright, sincere.

We talked continuously on the long trudge in to Base. We talked setting up belays and talked outside at night, our voices hoarse in the dry cold air. And despite the isolating misery of high altitude we talked on the carry to Camp Four. And we lowered the zippers of our bags and held hands at 26,000 feet: all we could manage. When we got down to Base, she stacked a pyramid of toilet tissue in my tent.

"My dowry—sveets for da sveet," she said in her inalienable lilt.

We made such love as can be made. With twelve

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tents in a forty-foot circle, there were no secrets. I knew that. Did I love Marit? I wanted to revenge myself on Holly. And the next day Holly was viciously angry.

We'd scheduled two moves: first, the Terrible T's, Beans and Rosie, would carry up to Camp Four and then retreat to Two. Meanwhile, Marit and Rasta Cassidy would go to Three, sleep, and then climb the buttress with full loads to establish Camp Five on the ridge: a necessity to reach the peak.

I'd given up my summit bid to Holly and Jay. I needed one good sacrifice. I'd sold myself and pushed the route, and now I'd relinquish the peak. We had it wired. But, suddenly, Holly was adamant. She and Jay were such a strong team they didn't need Five. In this weather, they could summit from Four. If the second team wanted a high camp, she'd wand the likely spots. But she could do without.

God. We argued in the cooktent, breathless from yelling, burning a day of good weather as goraks croaked outside, fighting for scraps. With Holly's plan there'd be more supplies for a second attempt, maybe a third. Goraks lit on the yellow nylon and their feet made runes: three-forked death. I spoke up: Above the buttress the ridge is corniced, sixty degrees and 600 meters gain. Crazy, at that altitude. Crazy.

We voted, as I stared her down—How can you go through with this?—and she looked away. Dorje looked away. Lal sighed as he counted the pebbles. She won, 8 to 5, and smiled, her gaze hooded. Jay rolled his eyes at me and tipped his head toward Marit. And Marit was biting her lip, staring at Holly.

Did I love Marit Lund? Does that matter, now? My eyes followed the resolute arc of her forehead, and the black intersecting swirl of her hair. She was solid, slim, ground to a fine edge. Her lips were chapped. She bit her lower lip and I could see a drop of blood. She raised a prayer scarf. If I'd kept her from moving into my tent, Holly would have stuck to the plan, and died. Marit would have been asleep at Three, and safe. It was a major fall of ice: 360 million cubic feet was the figure given by the BBC.

As it was, she whispered as I fled the tent and touched my face. I couldn't understand what she said. Thirteen in Base. In the dark, I say twelve names aloud. That's all.

Holly came, and sat with me, and tried to joke, and left in tears. They'd offered her a separate deal, she said. Jay had stopped talking and sold his sleepless nights to ABC, and then fled, to smoke and solo overhangs. They'd missed the big scene. That's mine, but interest fades. This year's king is next year's dust.

I could lie: excise my greedy schemes and rumbling bowels. Or stay mute and let others write about my lifelong quest and dire premonitions. It may already have been done. How would I know? The sponsor fills their pages with his ads, hawking freedom to the caged, a poignant work. Tyranny. As a climber you recognize that. But to use it, coldly, is a mortal sin.

Marit was good. Cold and bright our days passed up above, in a landscape stunning but expressionless. I can still hear a line from a tape she played, Laurie Anderson: *This is the hand, the hand that takes.* In an old National Geographic I saw a photo of village Arabs hacking a man's hand off: he'd stolen a pail of milk. Marit, I loved you. No one will ever love me again. Is that enough?

No. It's a smaller, darker pain, a sunspot, barely visible for the glare.

Now, now the winter smolders in periodic rains, green everywhere, except the sky. This tangled country lends itself to getting lost. I imagine the nurses living in the scrub, donning clean, white garments for their shifts, and then slipping back naked into the green. Raw flesh. In my dreams they tear me from this bed and cut my throat, and send my smoke up to the sky.

I will not let the bastard sell my tongue.

She's up there, Marit, in the ice, the howling white. Or her body. The days confuse. There's no ice here: I can't see rock, can't see bare earth, except when the door swings back. Then I want to roll from the bed, worm over the sill, scrabble in the fallen leaves, taste the loamy dirt.

Armadillo. That's what makes the noise at night.

Doctor Stell, she comes, lifts the blinds, and slides the glass away. Star of the Sea. She holds her tears, all tears. She lets the soft air in. When she leaves, the nurses mutter, flip the catches, twirl the wand, and cut me from the world. I want to kiss their arms, to lick the lovely salt from the hollows of their amber throats.

I can tell you this, Dog. Now I understand. And I refuse. But I'm trapped in your frozen wave. The Japanese waked up at the boom, saw the moonlit cloud of ice, and traversed from their camp. I spent the night encased, they say, my two hands open to the sky. At dawn my hands were thrust, the only sign, from the broken field of light. At first, they say, they looked like two black wings, a wounded gorak, trying to lift free.

This air is dense, like flesh. It plays a twist of moss and strokes a five-rayed flower that shudders once and settles in its frame of leaves. In the dark I practice how to move, but the pain is worse. The needle is my only love. Kill me, Doctor. (No.) It hurts because you're healing, she says, and gives me the shots with her own hands. How many of his staples did you leave in me?

The wind is a fingertip, and leaves shine under it

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

■

like skin. How does it shift one leaf and not all those around? Two fans on the same palmetto spring apart: downdraft, vortex, eddy, spin? Leaves flutter like the white palms of a crowd, seen from the stage. Why must all things move?

What now, Lady of the Wave? What's left? Mercy unattached, and therefore merciless? Fuck saints. I'm not a saint. You save what you can save.

She sits in her blue chair, eyes hard.

"How long have you concealed this?"

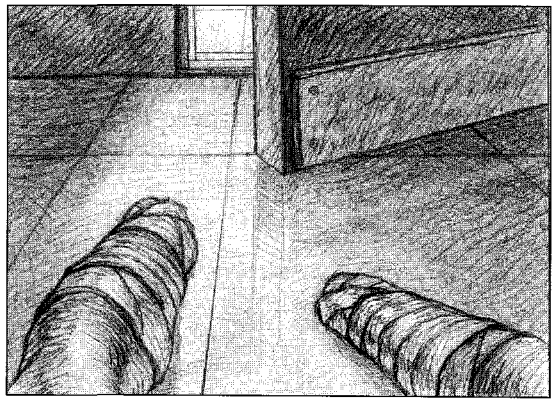
"What's this?" she says.

The sponsor sets a brushed-steel tape recorder on my tray. "Voice-activated." He starts it and her voice comes out, reading from Han Yü:

> Scarred by flame, hollowed out by waves
> you've stood here for ages.
> Your roots look like somebody's face
> and your trunk like a human body.

Then: "I wish you could find it in your heart to speak." Brief silence. "I won't give you up to him."

I remember: facing me, she cried. Quietly. The recording stops. And then starts at the sound of cloth. I remember her weight, the firmness of her lips, the salty taste, as she covered me like a wave.



And then the steel door, hush. Then, again: Maxfield Whittus. . . Lawrence Rugh. . . Benjamin Taliaferro. . . Lewis Browning. . . Roseanna Tamminen. . . Douglas Cassidy. . . Patrick Lively. . . Owen Burgraff. . . John Liska. . . Catherine Cates. . . Lopsang Dorje. . .Namlal Cha. . . Marit. . Marit. . .Marit Lund. . .

I look into his eyes. My gaze should make them melt, like those Hiroshima victims who saw a fireball bloom. He shrugs, picks up his machine, and turns it off.

"This is very wrong," she says.

He smiles, good teeth in a bad grin, and strides to the bed. "No problem with memory. Nor with the vocal apparatus. So? Are we satisfied?" He prods my shoulder. "Ready to meet our obligations?" He shoots his right hand to the base of my neck and spans the muscle, digging his thumb in deep.

Her fist thuds on his back. He turns and grabs her wrist. "Sit in your chair."

"I will not. My patient is—"

"My patience is done. You will leave my property. Now."

He turns back to me and she hauls at his coat, heels clattering on the tile. He thrusts an elbow to her ribs and she doubles, and he turns and grins.

Deliberately, I strike his face dead-on with my bony stump.

The room goes pink, a sunrise, as he howls, as blood sprays over me. The door slams back: a black man, nurses, and a needle. I feel the Doctor's hands, and hear her cry as I blink out: "Hemorrhaging . . You bastards. . . broke the fucking screws."

No matter what you lose, there's more. No river, meandering through smoky hills, and no blue seat. O Doctor Gone.

In a clotted voice, through bandages, the sponsor explains. I nod. It's meaningless, the rise and fall of leaves. No shots, no shots, the pain impossible and white. The nurses are frightened black pairs of eyes, murmuring as I veer in and out. Now I hear the jet stream roaring and the click of steel on rock, and feel the ache of gripping my tools, hear the rasp of every breath. I see the white peak loom.

He speaks: noise, like creatures digging in the scrub. The forest blots him black. I measure him with the blinds, ghostly parallels, like stress cracks in a lens. If you look at anything it ought to make some sense, but there are limits.

I'd like to know. A dumpster? The woods? Did animals eat them?

I know the straps. Soon, I'll take my body from this bed of thorns.

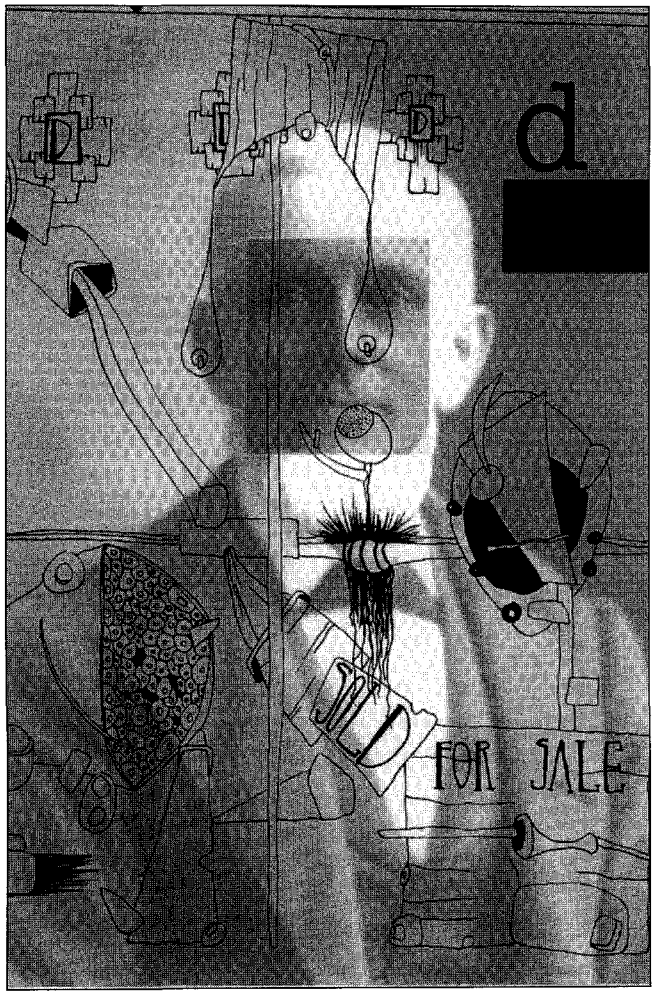
Santa Lucia. I cherished her, after church, the beauty that swelled under her white plaster robe. I was always the last to leave. Once I touched her cool, hard breast, my fingers still wet from the font.

Near dark, beyond the glass, a butterfly tilts amidst the green confusion. She wavers on white wings, a pinched heart, perfectly distinct. She lands on a pruned stub, laurel blackened by the rain, flicking in and out of sight.

Marit. This is barely, barely possible. I fall from the bed and wait. I take the knob between my wrists. I shut the door, on the white room, quietly. The woods are close. I taste earth's dusk, lovely and rotten. Now we lose everything. The glossy leaves bow down. I smell the sea. O Stella, Marit, love: I hear you roar. Wet sand. The low ground. Your salt wet musk. Now give me rest. The ice will come. O give me slop, wash, foam, and chill. So beautiful, she rises.

So cold. Water. Salt. And we rise together, white wings open to the sky. □

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



PASSAGES

A Story by Hilary Masters

He would remember the corridors of that last, best establishment always seemed to terminate, but then, with an unexpected jog or a rise of two steps, a hallway would range deeper into the ramshackle mansion toward one more room, one last closed door. Often, he stopped to listen at some of these doors, and he became acquainted with the roomers behind them by the particular sounds they made: a cough or scrape of footfall, a radio program; sometimes, he heard peculiar scratching noises as if the occupant within was burrowing deeper into the plaster walls and oak floors of the rooming house his grandfather owned.

His own room was at the very top, above all the narrow corridors and the closed doors, and within a curiously windowed loggia that looked out on three sides and down on the boulevard below. Later, he would wonder if its design had been a whimsical afterthought of the architecht grown bored with the commonplace first three floors he had been commissioned to design. In any event, this elevation made for a daring, exclusive perch from which he could look both ways down the avenue before the house. He could monitor the passage of streetcars as he did his lessons, bathe in the reddish gold of sunsets or, occasionally, at dawn almost feel the large house tilt slightly beneath him to frame the morning sun in the opposite window.

It was like a cozy treehouse, his alone, and he had fixed it up with all the excitement of a Robinson Crusoe, amazed by his own ingenuity with orange crates and odd hangings; not to mention, the possibilities for secrecy in the contorted cornices and cabinetry carpenters had fashioned to fulfill the architecht's off-hand inspiration. A dig into these sites might have revealed the geneaology of his tenancy; mysterious pieces of yarn, tops and lead soldiers, a birthday card from a grade school sweetheart and, finally, a magazine with pictures of young women indifferently standing in their underwear.

Aromas, too, had been collected in the hallways to rise in a stale buoyancy to his floor, but they had never offended him. On the contrary, their mildly fecal nuance so saturated his sensual tissue that later in life their odors could be recalled as easily as holding his fingers beneath his nose. Scraps of sound also drifted from the black iron grill of the heat register set beneath a window seat, as if from the speaker of a poorly adjusted radio: a jumble of faint music and comedy programs. Of these, he could always distinguish his grandmother's radio playing in the back room next to the kitchen on the first floor. When they had moved into this final outpost, she had curled into the sheets of her bed to follow the misadventures of Jack Benny or Fibber McGee and Molly. He had learned the comedians' routines, their timing; sometimes pausing in his homework to anticipate the punchline coming from below, the expected

CASEY SLACK

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sound effect that would explode the laughter of a studio audience.

In their first weeks at this last address, he had gone into her room to sit by her bed and share these programs with her as they crackled from the bakelite case of the radio at her bedside. Once or twice, a gnarled, withered hand would shyly come forth from beneath the coverlet, and he would obey its silent entreaty and close his own upon its skeletal shape. Hand in hand, they would listen to the domestic farces that stirred so much laughter, but his own routines, school work and neighborhood play, eventually drew him away from her bedside, so sharing the programs through the heat register of his room was all he could do. Then, one evening, an abrupt silence, as if the radio had been turned off in the middle of a joke, even before its laughter had broken. He always thought the interruption had been unfair. In fact, his grandfather had turned off the radio that Sunday evening and then walked down the street and brought back a doctor who lived several houses away. The end of those broadcasts also signaled another change, as if turning off that radio had given his grandfather the license to start shutting down the rest of their lives. Perhaps those old vaudeville routines had tenuously bound them, together and they had become undone in the silence of that interrupted skit.

By then, of course, he had also given up his dutiful watch of the streetcars that stopped before the house and had become resigned that his mother would never get off one of them. He had imagined how she would do this—stepping down from the car, saving a little hop for the last step to the pavement—with her purse pressed close to her bosom. But he could never see her face. From his high prospect, he would only be able to see the top of her head. If there had been pictures of her on the mantel of an earlier house, he could not remember them, and her image had been banished in subsequent domiciles, when she had banished all of them.

So, in his mind's eye, he would follow the top of her head as she crossed the boulevard and advanced to the sidewalk before the house to disappear beneath the broad overhang of the front porch roof. In winter, she would wear a dark turban, exotic and of the Orient—he had seen pictures of some in a magazine—but something lighter in spring and summer of straw and perhaps with outrageous cloth daisies at the brim.

Also, in warm weather all the doors and windows of the enormous wreck were wide open, and he would sometimes cock his ears, put down the model plane he had been assembling, to attend voices at the front door far below. He might have missed her. She had not come by streetcar, but by a yellow cab that had stopped around the corner, and she had come up the sidewalk and across the lawn and up on the porch. He would strain to hear the exchange at the front door; sounds of surprise, perhaps angry words right off, and then murmurs of reprieve sifting through the big screen door his grandfather was always repairing. But only the usual sounds would drift up through the register, the muffled hack of the old soldier on the second floor, a closet door in another part opened and closed discretely.

His mother had left all of them, not just him, though he had first reasoned that she had gone to look for his father, who had left her as well. It was a funny sort of relay that would occupy him as he fell asleep, following the lights of a late night streetcar moving across the ceiling above his bed. If that chain of events could only be interrupted at one point, they might all be together once again. Sometimes, as he drifted off, he imagined her fierce and strong, like a comic book super woman, her cape unfurled as she pulled this vagrant man up by his collar and shook some sense into him. Other times, she would appear like one of the young women in the secreted magazine, toothsome and insouciant in their near-nakedness, but this fantasy would make him uneasy, though he knew she must wear underwear and would resemble the models in every way.

But all of his sentry duty had long been given up when he swung down off the streetcar one afternoon, his book satchel become a parachute pack that had become tangled in novels that had fouled the lines, stories about boys abandoned and put up for adoption only to become well off. If he could just land safely, he might evade the panzer division closing in, but his grandfather was pounding a *For Sale* sign into the bald pate of the terrace before their house. So he landed on the pavement a little winded and flat. He looked up. Through the softening buds of the elms he saw the wide, high windows of his crow's nest, and through the wide glass panes he had made out the corners of pictures he had tacked to the room's walls, the closet door he had left open that morning. The great bulk of the house seemed to shift, disengage, like a ship almost imperceptibly coming off its mooring, about to make way and leave him stranded on this streetcar island in the middle of the boulevard.

"It is time," his grandfather told him. They were fixing their supper in the high, dark kitchen at the back of the house. The door of his grandmother's room was closed. Porch chairs and snow shovels were kept there now. "I can no more do this," the old man said.

Unattended and unruled in its application, the pronoun could refer to the meat frying in the pan as well as the operation of the rooming house: collecting the rent and making the endless repairs. Or, he would think later, his grandfather had referred to waking up morning after morning in the dim front room on the first floor. Or it could have applied to the two of them, man and boy, their relationship; the pain it caused the old man just to

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

rise from his lounge chair every afternon to ask about schoolwork, and even that schoolwork now far beyond his expertise. The *this* had become a burden too heavy for him.

"I have figured it out," his grandfather continued, turning the smoking meat over in the pan. He had been a fireman, and the boy often wondered if his method of cooking had some connection with the conflagrations he had battled as a young man—lashing burly, ferocious horses through the night, then, just before his retirement, gripping the enormous steering wheel of a heavy-tired machine.

"You'll have a roof over your head, and you'll get a good education," he had continued."That's to be kept in mind. Your reports are good and the state university is a fine institution. I've paid taxes for it." Plates had been set on the kitchen table in the middle of the large room. This kitchen with its tall, glass-fronted cabinets on three sides had been planned for a staff of servants, his grandmother's room had been the pantry, so at meal times the very volume of emptiness seemed to press the two men into a greater intimacy. As the meat fried, his job was to choose a canned vegetable from the store kept in a cabinet over the sink. Peas, carrots, green beans, spinach, succotash; the selection never mattered to them for the contents all tasted the same. Potatoes had been boiled in their jackets and waited in their cooling water.

All that spring, his classmates had talked happily of their college plans, their applications to different schools that had been accepted. Quietly, he had listened to their excited buzzings as they stood before their lockers and walked to classrooms. And he had tried to picture himself on a university campus, a wide pastoral vista with the muffled sounds of a football game in the distance. In fact, similar sounds had risen from the register as the roomer on the third floor tuned in to the contests. Cornell. Purdue. Northwestern. Notre Dame. The names had seeped into him like the recitations of an oracle, ancient and sacred sites which he knew instinctively were not a part of his destiny.

On the cover of his notebook, a couple leapt high in the air, holding huge megaphones. The girl resembled the young women in the magazine hidden behind the molding, though she was dressed in a flaring skirt and a heavy sweater. The young man wore a similar sweater and on both a large capital D had been fixed. He had spent almost an hour in the school library looking up the names of the colleges this exhuberant pair might have cheered to victory. Dartmouth. Denison. Drake. Davidson. Duke. Duquesne. He had made a list and tacked it to the wall, next to the map of the world, above his bed.

So the thought of going to college had occurred to him, but his grandfather's announcement had astonished him. That evening, after they had done the dishes and after he had climbed up to his room to do his homework, he stared at the cover of his notebook. He put himself into the saddle shoes of the boy in mid-air and he fell in love with the girl. Her smile clearly enabled her to defy gravity. That he could be in that picture, hold up one of those megaphones—the letter D was totally inappropriate for the state university— stunned him. It was like finding pieces of gold on the sidewalk in front of the house. He looked around his room to assess his belongings: the small plane models hanging on slender threads from the ceiling, different arrangements of marbles and fishbones. All worked a sad alchemy to leaden his excitement.The boulevard below was washed by automobile lights, and a near-empty streetcar trundled by without stopping. He would lose this observation post.

"It's too much for me to handle," the old man had said.

"But what about you? Where will you go?"

"There's a firemen's home in upstate New York. I've paid into it over the years. Comfortable place. Has everything I will need."

How like the old man to arrange their future in this practical manner. He had confronted the decay of the old house in the same way, attending each breakdown with just the right amount of repair at the right time. A long piece of wire in his toolbox waited to bandage a patch around a drain on the third floor when the corrosion finally worked its way through the metal. His grandfather had probably reviewed this plan to send him to the state university for years, turning it over in his head like the pages of an old history, as he had slept unknowingly high above.

"You'll be far happier with your own kind," the old man said with a wisdom that concluded the topic, though he might have been addressing himself as well. He could imagine his grandfather sitting in a large sunporch at the end of rows of neatly made beds, trading stories of disasters with other old firemen, talking of the power and capacities of different water pumps. Perhaps, in all those years of nursing the recluse in the room off the kitchen; all those complaints that had collared him on stair landings and in the hallways; the problems with hot water, broken linoleums, the screens—always the screens—that needed repair; perhaps in all those years the old man had hungered and planned for this idyll, this place of reminiscences of more challenging times, genuine emergencies that carried the possibilities of heroism. For a time, they would write to each other, his grandfather's hand becoming more and more spidery as the messages set down cautions on incurring debts, on certain foods and women.

And what about the room off the kitchen? Where would its aromas of lavender sachet and powder go, the

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dried flowers in the Haviland vase on the bureau? The radio? Several times he had come into the room to sit on the empty bed and reach over to turn the knob of the radio.The dial's light would surprise him, and the familiar sounds within the plastic box seemed to pick up where they had been turned off. The same comedians telling the same jokes on Sunday evenings. He would watch from his perch for his grandfather to emerge from beneath the porch and walk down to the corner park where games of checkers were played in the evening. Once the old man had turned the corner, he would slip down the stairs to the small room off the kitchen and sit on her bed and listen to the radio, sometimes laughing out loud. How could these silly jokes have penetrated the thick blanket of despair she had pulled over her head? Or had the jokes ever interested her, but maybe the audiences' laughter had cheered her a little. Or perhaps those anonymous hoots and giggles, a monotonous hilarity, were a response to what her life had become. He promised himself, the day after his grandfather's announcement, that he would never leave this radio behind.

"But look," he said to the old man the next night. "I can take care of this place, come back on weekends." They were frying small steaks. "The university isn't that far away. You don't have to worry about the house at that place in New York. I can handle everything for you."

"No, it's done," the old man said.

"Done? It's sold already?"

"No, but it will be. It has to be this way."

"What if I don't go to the university? What if I stay here?"

"Stay where, boy?" His grandfather's tone was more amused than impatient. "Where will you stay? How will you live?"

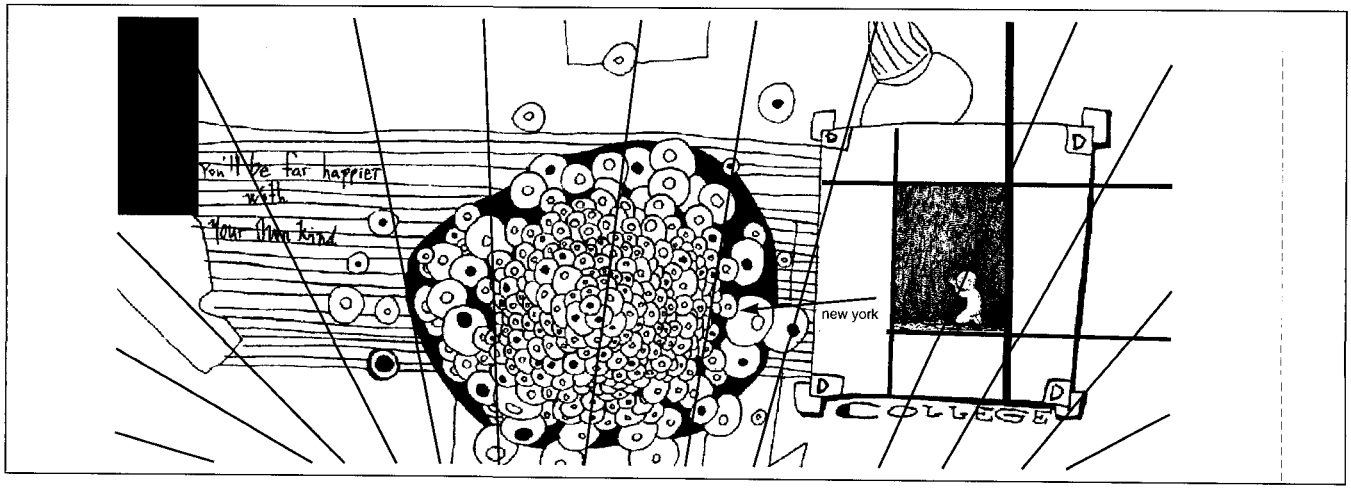
"I'll get a job," he replied. He felt they were being overheard. His grandfather slowly shook his head and moved the frying slabs of meat around in the pan with a long fork. "Are you sure you can find a buyer?" Who would buy such a derelict, he had almost added, but the words had lumped in his throat, and his eyes stung with his own disloyalty.

"Someone will buy it,"the old man said with a smile. "Here. Pass your plate."

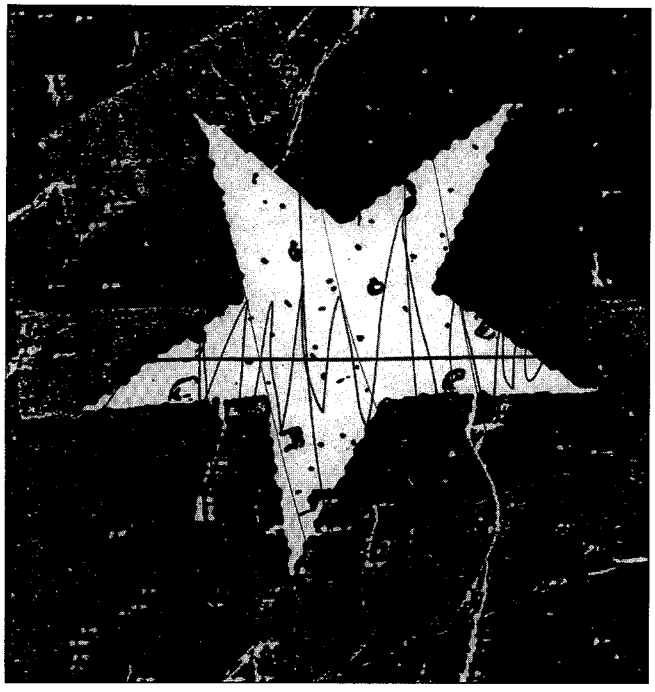
So, like all the mendings his grandfather had made of the old house, he too had been put right—the university was everything he had ever dreamed of and more. The campus was a verdant acropolis, and he had joined the roar in the stadium, the endless excitements in the classrooms. The cover of his old notebook had come to life, but he had not brought it with him. He had left it precisely in the center of his desk in his room high above the boulevard.

His grandfather's first letter told of the quick sale to the first comer, more of a transfer of deed than an actual passing of money, and this letter was written and posted from the railway station as he was about to board the train for New York. It was as if he had been afraid the transaction could be called back if reported from any other location. The new owner wasted no time, hiring a crew to demolish the house and prepare the lot for a new building. "It is to be only two floors," his grandfather wrote. "A dry cleaners on the first and an insurance office on the second. He'll have to do something about parking."

Sometimes, if his roomate stayed out late, he would quietly play the radio by his bed. The dim glow of its dial would gradually define everything in this new room, this new arrangement that was becoming his own. He would listen to the music of dance bands on remote broadcasts from around the country, their throbbing rhythms playing against his drowsy pulse as he visualized the old house being taken apart from the top down. Piece by piece the workmen removed the structure, and sometimes they would pause in their demolition to look over curious items left behind by the former residents: pincushions and souvenir ashtrays, old letters, magazines and pieces of yarn, and pictures of innocence, for the first and last time, unclothed. □

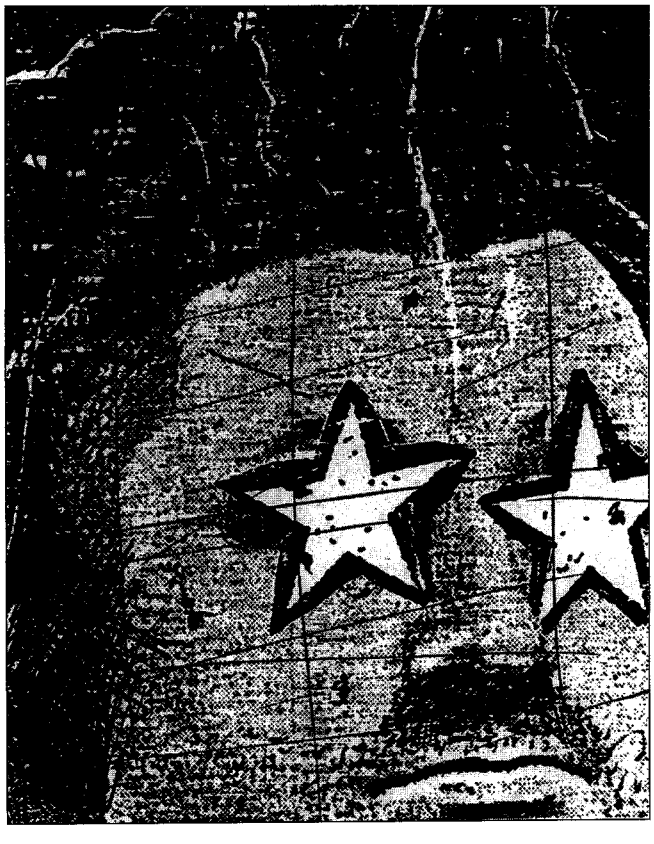


PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



STEPPING OFF

A Story by Jeff Minerd



I thought things couldn't get any worse for The Samuel Coleman Quartet when my bassist, Bart Scribs, decided to take a little break from reality—not to mention rhythm and harmony—right there on the job.

We were at Sweeny's Restaurant, up on the dais, squeezed in between the potted palms, and sleep-walking through Ellington's "In A Mellow Tone." My elbows throbbed, but I did my best to lay down a steady swing rhythm. Bart's walking bass line kept in step and Rudy improvised on the keys, doing all right, but playing kind of fluttery, his phrases zigging and zagging the way a butterfly does in the air. Lionel had just finished the same old sax solo he always played on that tune, so he laid out, listening with closed eyes and snapping his fingers. Waiters in tuxedos glided between the tables, stirring up tired candle flames. The diners murmured low. As Rudy finished, I nodded to Bart to take a couple choruses. "In A Mellow Tone" was the one tune I let him solo on each night.

One minute he played as usual: smiling, arms wrapped around that upright bass like it was a big-hipped woman he was love-squeezing from behind; the glow from Sweeny's chandelier reflecting off that pudding-smooth head of his; notes like sweet talk. And the next minute his face contorted and his hands clawed up and down the neck trying to find the best spot to choke the life out of the thing. That poor bass howled and screeched and moaned. Rudy and I dropped out. Heads turned. Waiters bumped into each other. Sweeny himself hurried over, scowling and jerking a finger across his neck.

Shouting at Bart didn't do any good. His bass was plugged into a small amplifier behind him, turned up loud. I had to lean over my drums and whack his arm with a stick to get his attention. "We're out," I mouthed, and hit my cymbals, making them sizzle while Rudy banged and held a final chord and Lionel threw in an ending lick. Bart's hands fell away from the strings, twitched at his sides with tremors that darted down from his shoulders. He closed his eyes and leaned against the bass. I was coming out from behind my drum kit to see if he was all right when Sweeny grabbed me by the cuff of my tux.

"What the hell was that?" he said.

Sweeny was one of those top-forty-listening, trendy-ass kids who wanted jazz in his place because he thought it was "classy." I told him that's what he'd heard: jazz, which he'd hired us to play.

"Listen," he said. "Any more of that avante-garde stuff and you're out of here, understand?"

"Well, boss," I shrugged. "We do what we got to do; you do what you got to do."

"I'm warning," he pointed a finger at me, then hus-

OSIE L. JOHNSON, JR.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tled off to kiss up to his offended customers. I called a break.

The bartender smirked as he set out a double scotch for Lionel, a 7-Up for Rudy, and beers for Bart and me. Bart climbed up onto a stool and hunched over his beer, squeezing the bottle with his thick hands like he was trying to cool them down. His twitching settled to a tic in his right shoulder. Lionel downed half his scotch in one gulp and sputtered, "What kind of fucked-up mess was that?"

"Lionel," I held up a hand. "I'll handle this."

Rudy cleared his throat with his smoker's cough. "I've heard guys play outside the key," he said, his voice fading in and out the way it did like some raspy pump-organ with tired feet at the pedals, "but that was like outside the known universe. That was a brave bit of spatial exploration."

"Bart," I asked, "what happened?"

He swallowed some beer. Set the bottle down. Picked at the label. When he answered, he seemed to be talking to the green glass. "I couldn't help it. Sorry."

We were quiet for a minute, until Lionel, who was on his fourth or fifth double scotch of the night, let loose with a sharp laugh. "Sorry? SORRY? You bet your ass that shit was sorry. Sorriest solo I heard in a long time."

Bart cocked his head to look at Lionel through one narrowed eye. "What's *your* excuse?"

Lionel set down his drink. "Huh?"

Bart leaned closer. "Every night you try, Lionel, don't you? Every night you think, if I just have more to drink, I can make that leap. But every night you chicken out. You're nothing but a shallow, cliché-blowing bastard."

Lionel's quick with the hard words and I thought for sure Bart was going to get some back. But Lionel only folded his arms and stared down into his drink, because he knew what Bart said was true. I knew it too, but I didn't *know* I knew it until Bart laid it out there.

See, when you're improvising you have to leave your mind with all its planning and worrying behind and let something deeper take over. It's scary, like stepping off a window ledge and hoping you can walk on air, but when you do it and suddenly you're *walking* out there, you find music that says something true, music no one's ever heard or will hear again, not just a bunch of copped licks all strung together. Lionel hadn't stepped off in years. Sometimes he'd get close: his phrases made us tighten the groove, expecting something, but he'd back away, play his old, safe lines.

Lionel stared down into that scotch like a man watching river water from a bridge. He's so skinny his tux looks like it's on a hanger even when he's wearing it, and right then he seemed even scrawnier than usual.

I said, "That's enough, both of you." Bart shrugged and went back to picking the label off his bottle. Lionel downed his drink and ordered another with a weak wave. Rudy blew cigarette smoke out his nose and watched the bubbles rise in his 7-Up.

I rubbed an elbow, but it only made the ache spread to my knees. I had that light-headed, shaky-cranky feeling that meant I needed my insulin. "I want you all back out there and ready to go in five minutes."

In Sweeny's bathroom, as I took the insulin needle out of my thigh, I noticed something that burned me: some kid had written the name of a Rock and Roll group on my stall wall. I used this silver pen I keep on me to scratch the name out. I know it's silly, an old man messing with bathroom graffiti, but you don't know what Rock and Roll did to me and my band.

See, The Samuel Coleman Quartet was once so close to the big time we could have spit and hit it from where we stood. We'd put out an album on a small label back in the 'fifties, and the critics called us "spectacular" and "up and coming." Our agent booked us at every major club across the country. Rumor had it that Columbia Records—Miles Davis's label—was eyeballing us, so I carried that silver pen everywhere I went; if some Columbia exec approached me with a contract, that baby was going to be signed on the spot.

Then Rock and Roll overran the country like some kind of epidemic. Bunch of makeup-wearing, flashy-pants assholes who couldn't even play blues right, and everyone acting like their music was the most momentous thing since Jesus Christ came down. The record companies cut back—I mean way back—on their jazz titles and left a lot of artists, including good old Sammy C and his band, out in the cold. We lost our label. We lost our agent. We lost all our good bookings. We watched our album disappear from record stores. Finally, we started doing gigs like Sweeny's. My men took it hard.

Rudy got himself hooked on reefer. Every gig he showed up with eyes so glassy I could skate on them, and his tux reeking of the stuff. He plunked his big ass down in front of Sweeny's house piano and didn't even care it was out of tune. Had been for years. Rudy used to take the chords of any old standard and substitute fresh ones, and play them in lush voicings until it was like you were hearing that song for the first time. But at Sweeny's he was so high and the piano so flat sometimes it sounded like he was on a different song than the rest of us. Plus he lost his place improvising; he'd be flailing away because he was about five-and-a-half measures behind, and I'd have to signal to Lionel to step in and bail him out.

You already know some about Lionel. I'll tell you more: somewhere back in the late 'sixties, the man stopped polishing his horn. That axe used to be a bright brass-gold, and if you could put a color to

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Lionel's playing, it would have been that: brilliant golden notes, so many so fast flying out of him and all sparkling in the air and dazzling your ears so you couldn't help but laugh. But over the years that horn turned a dull, greasy, greenish-brown, and that's how Lionel's playing turned: all his favorite phrases rusty and stuck together, corroded, careless. Sickly green notes oozed out of him like things hauled up from the bottom of a swamp. And he put away two or three double scotches each break. By the end of the night that horn squawked and gurgled like it was at the lips of a drowning man, and I'd have to signal to Rudy to jump in and save him with the ivories.

We sounded all right as a band because these two were never completely out of it at the same time. Rudy didn't smoke at the gig, so about halfway through the night the THC in his brain fell to a manageable level. He played decent changes and always knew where we were at. That was about the time Lionel started to drop into Dewar's-land.

Every gig I used to thank God for Bart. He wasn't a great improvisor or full of flash, but he was steady. His strength was his sensitive feel and the way he listened. If Rudy sprang some strange substitution chord on us, Bart played smoothly through it. If I upped the tempo a notch or threw in a little Latin feel, he was right there with me. In fact, his listening grew so strong over the years he heard the things underneath our rhythms, notes, and chords. Sometimes the hair on the back of my hands would rise; I'd look up and Bart would have his ear cocked toward me, watching me sideways through one half-lidded eye, and I knew he wasn't just hearing my drums; he was listening in on my *soul*. The corners of his mouth would curl, like he knew a secret about me.

Me, I had one hope keeping me going: that the Samuel Coleman Quartet would rise to popularity again. I had a theory worked out, about how everything goes in cycles, rising and falling. We'd been on a downslide, sure, but back then, in the early eighties, jazz was coming back. If jazz could, why couldn't we? The lower we sank the higher my hopes rose, because I believed our comeback would be as spectacular as our fall. Big wheels in the entertainment business dined at Sweeny's; all we needed was the right man to walk in at the right time. Before each gig, I made sure that silver pen was stashed in my tux jacket pocket.

Next gig Lionel *showed up* drunk, so it was his squawking and gurgling over Rudy's lost-in-the-weed chord comping on tune after butchered tune. Bart and I had to hang tight and think quick to handle it. I came down so definite on one and three a deaf man could have clapped along, and Bart played lines so simple a child could have followed the chord changes. I wasn't sure about giving Bart his solo, but when "In a Mellow Tone" rolled around it was part thankfulness, part tiredness that made me nod at him.

From the first bar, he struggled. His fingers made stabs for notes not in the key, but he held them back. He twisted his face like a weight-lifter trying to set a record and his scalp sprouted sweat-pearls that glistened in the chandelier light. Finally, he let his hands jump all over the bass like they were double-teaming it in a back-alley brawl: they slapped and hammered and bent those strings until they howled and cried for mercy. People turned aroud in their chairs to stare. Some of them winced, and this white-haired woman with glittering rocks on every finger put her hands over her ears.

Lionel shuffled off the dais. Rudy shouted at Bart from the piano bench, but I couldn't hear him over the bass. I slipped out from behind the drums and pulled the plug on Bart's amp. When the amp cut out, everybody heard the last part of Rudy's shout—"...COMPLETELY FUCKED-UP?"—and then the tinny plink and snap of Bart's strings. Without volume, Bart's "solo" faded to nothing. He circled his arms around the bass, swayed with it like a slow dancer, until his knees folded and he slumped to the floor. The bass fell on top of him, and its neck crashed against my ride cymbal on the way down, like this was the punch line of some comedian's joke.

I got the bass off him and Rudy helped me haul him to his feet. He blinked like he didn't quite recognize us, but he let me put my arm under his and lead him off the dais.

"He's drunk," the white-haired woman said, and the word spread in whispered ripples around the room.

We took him to the bar, sat him on a stool, got him a glass of water. Lionel was there, mumbling to his scotch. Bart took a shaky sip of water, wiped the sweat off his face with cocktail napkins, unclipped his bow tie and unbuttoned the top button of his tux shirt. He squinted at Lionel, then Rudy, then me, recognizing us.

"Couldn't help it," he said. "Sorry."

Rudy shook his head and said what I would have said, if something hadn't made me hesitate. "Bart, man, you're going to cost us this job. I don't know what's going on with you, but can't you control yourself?"

Bart narrowed his eyes at Rudy like a lion taking bead on a zebra. "Control myself? You're talking to me about controlling myself? Tell me something, Rudy, can you even remember the last time you were straight?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. Right now you're so stoned you can't even play. You used to be good, Rudy, but now you're a joke. We carry you. You don't care about music anymore. There's only one thing in life you love, and it's

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

smoking little green weed and the only reason you don't want to lose this job is you need the money to buy it."

Rudy tried to keep a big, superior, you're-so-full-of-shit grin on his face, but the life drained out of it, little by little, until it looked about as convincing as the smile on a man in a casket. I glanced at Lionel. We knew Bart was right. Rudy's throat rumbled. "Bart, you ... I hope you...," but he turned away from us to hide what was underneath that dead-lipped grin.

"Bart," I said, "Seems to me you don't care much about us or this band yourself."

He looked at me sideways, and the corners of his mouth curled. "You really want to know what I think about you and this band?"

My heart said to me *watch out.* It said, Sammy C, you have your own awful truth and it's hovering right behind you. Bart can make it stand in front of you and you'll have to look. But my men were watching, so I licked my lips, crossed my arms, and said "What?"

Before Bart could get a word out Sweeny appeared behind us, hands on his hips. "Sorry to interrupt," he said. "But guess what? You're all fired. Pack up your stuff and pay for those drinks."

I live alone. A tenth-floor studio apartment where I practice and give lessons. Just a box, really, with a rusty stove and refrigerator right out in the open; a hide-a-bed; bathroom so small I have to tuck my legs under the sink when I'm sitting on the toilet. If I'd known I was going to spend most of my life in it, I would have chosen a better place. I'd move if I could afford anything else in Manhattan. Rent control, you know. Management is just waiting for me to die so they can rent it for ten times what I pay.

The night we got fired, I spent an hour or two leaning out my window, listening to the city's harsh music: the rumble of truck engines and the clunk of axles on potholes keeping rough rythm, the drone of radios and TVs for harmony, and over the top of it all the wild improvisation of curses, car horns. I thought about letting myself fall, letting that music swallow me up, but I shut the window and went to bed. I spent the next day under the sheets with a pillow over my head, all my joints feeling stuck with pins. The day after that, I felt a thought coming on and it had me flipping around like a fish on the beach. Then I sat straight up. Of course! The Samuel Coleman Quartet needed to finish falling. This rock-bottom was really the beginning of our climb. I kicked off the sheets.

After a weekend of legwork, I landed us a gig at a new club called Jarba's. I don't know how to explain it, but the air felt better there, seemed to carry the notes better, gave them a richer, cleaner sound. The room was all dark wood and brass. We had a bigger, carpeted dais, some colored lights, and even a parquet dance floor. The house piano, a sleek black baby grand, was in tune.

The new Samuel Coleman Quartet grooved better than ever. Rudy kept up with us from the first tune. Roger, our new bassist, a guy who used to sub for Bart, thrummed sweetly on his upright. Even Lionel's playing had some heart in it.

Toward the end of the night, during the opening bars of "In A Mellow Tone," I felt the hairs rise on the back of my hands. I scanned the room, but didn't spot him until the end of the tune. Bart was hiding behind a pillar near the door, just half of his face peering out, one hooded eye fixed on me. I hadn't seen or talked to him since the night Sweeny fired us, and he startled me so bad I dropped a stick. I bent down to pick it up, and when I looked again he was gone.

Free drinks wasn't part of the deal at Jarba's. On break, Lionel followed Rudy's order of 7-Up, so we all drank it. Roger, a thick-shouldered guy whose tux sleeves were too short, had a knack for joke-telling. He kept Lionel and Rudy laughing. My head was light, my hands shaky. I knew I should hit the stalls for a shot of insulin but I frowned over one shoulder, then the other, until they asked me what was wrong. I told them I'd seen Bart.

Lionel nodded. "I felt him."

"Me too," Rudy said.

"What was the story with him?" Roger asked.

"Went a little nuts," Lionel said.

"Not just nuts," added Rudy. "He turned plain mean."

"Let's not bad-mouth him." I talked louder than I needed to. "He was our friend for many years. He was going through some tough times. We all have. He wasn't so bad."

"After the things he said to me..." Lionel shrugged and shook his head.

"Not so bad?" Rudy rattled the ice in his glass. "I've seen some lame shit, but I have never, ever seen a whole band get fired for one guy's solo. I mean..." He chuckled, and us with him, "I mean, *that's* bad." We got the snickers, and when Rudy launched into a Bart impression, scrunching up his face and squirming his fingers and making fart noises with his tongue, we laughed so hard we had to hold on tight to our stools.

I was still smiling in the bathroom stall, even with the needle in my thigh. There, too, some kid had written the name of a Rock and Roll group on the wall, so I took out my silver pen and scribbled over it. When the door creaked open and somebody walked in, I paused. The man stood still while the door swung shut behind him. He turned off the lights.

"Hey," I called. "Somebody's in here."

His footsteps stopped in front of my stall door. The hairs on my hands sprang up.

"I heard you laughing," he said.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

FLOYD SKLOOT

Visiting Hour

We came straight from school,
crossing the island as winds
rose and fell. From half
a mile away the whitecapped
baywater smelled of fuel oil,
marsh grass, and autumn
darkness. Gulls circled
a trawler nudging the dock.
We gathered in an alley
behind the old hospital
where our fathers recovered,
or declined, or lingered
behind the cold panes keeping
them from us. We were too young
and full of dangerous life
to be allowed inside. Stroke,
cancer of the lung, a broken
hip, severed arm, failing heart.
We named our fathers by what held
them there. Clot, stone, spine.
Taking turns to stand on one
another's shoulders, we tapped
on windows as the sun set.
Fathers smiled within the folds
of their faces, waved, lay back
among the pillows. They turned
white before our eyes, became
empty spaces in our lives,
quiet behind glass in their
gleaming ground floor rooms.

I bolted the latch.

"You drop me from the band and don't tell me, and when I find you, you're all laughing about me. What gives you the right?"

"Bart," I said. "Please..."

"Who do you think you are?"

"Bart, I'm sorry. I didn't know you were there. I meant to call you..."

"You know who you are, Sammy?"

I covered my ears, but the words got through.

"You're a never-was, Sammy. You're the leader of a lousy little lounge band. You keep thinking you still have star material and that someday things will turn around, but you don't and they won't. Your chance to be somebody passed you by a long time ago, Sammy, and you're the only one who doesn't know it." I squeezed my eyes shut while he spoke, but I saw that thing that had been hovering behind me. It stepped in front of me and grinned. It was a man in a tuxedo, bent by age, gripping a pair of drumsticks. His grin was confident, arrogant, but anyone could see the man had no reason to grin like that.

I tightened my fingers around my pen until it jutted knife-like from my fist. I pulled my pants up, fumbled with the latch. "Bart, I'll kill you." I shouldered open the stall door and stabbed at the dark, but Bart escaped through the outer door with a laugh and flash of light; my pants slipped and tripped me up as I tried to follow. Even after the crack of tile against my skull I felt myself falling.

With a throbbing bump on my forehead, I leaned out my window until four in the morning, listening to the city. I took my pen out and rolled it between my fingers for a while. I clicked it a few times. I brought it to my lips for a kiss. Then I let it go. I closed my eyes and listened for it to hit the pavement, but it never made a sound.

I quit playing. Not that I quit showing up for the gig and sitting behind my set and hitting the drums with my sticks so I could collect some pay. I just quit *playing*. I became like a metronome, but broken, dragging the beat, speeding up, forgetting where the downbeat was. Lionel called the tunes because I'd just sit there and shrug.

It didn't help that Bart showed up every night. I tried to get the manager to toss him out, but as long as Bart didn't harass us and paid for his beers they couldn't do anything. So he sat at the bar and sipped while we played, but he didn't make my hand-hairs spring up anymore. He didn't try to talk to us. On our breaks, he disappeared. "What's he want?" Rudy would ask. I'd shrug. "He's waiting for something," Lionel would say.

Then one night, right in the middle of the gig, Lionel *stepped off*. I heard him get close, but didn't think about it or expect it when bam! he made the leap. His notes weren't shimmering and golden anymore, they weren't saying brilliant and dazzling things. He'd found something new to say, deep dark notes that wailed from blue to purplish-black, the color of bruises, telling about being old, about having the dreams picked out of your pockets, about knowing you were going to die without ever getting them back.

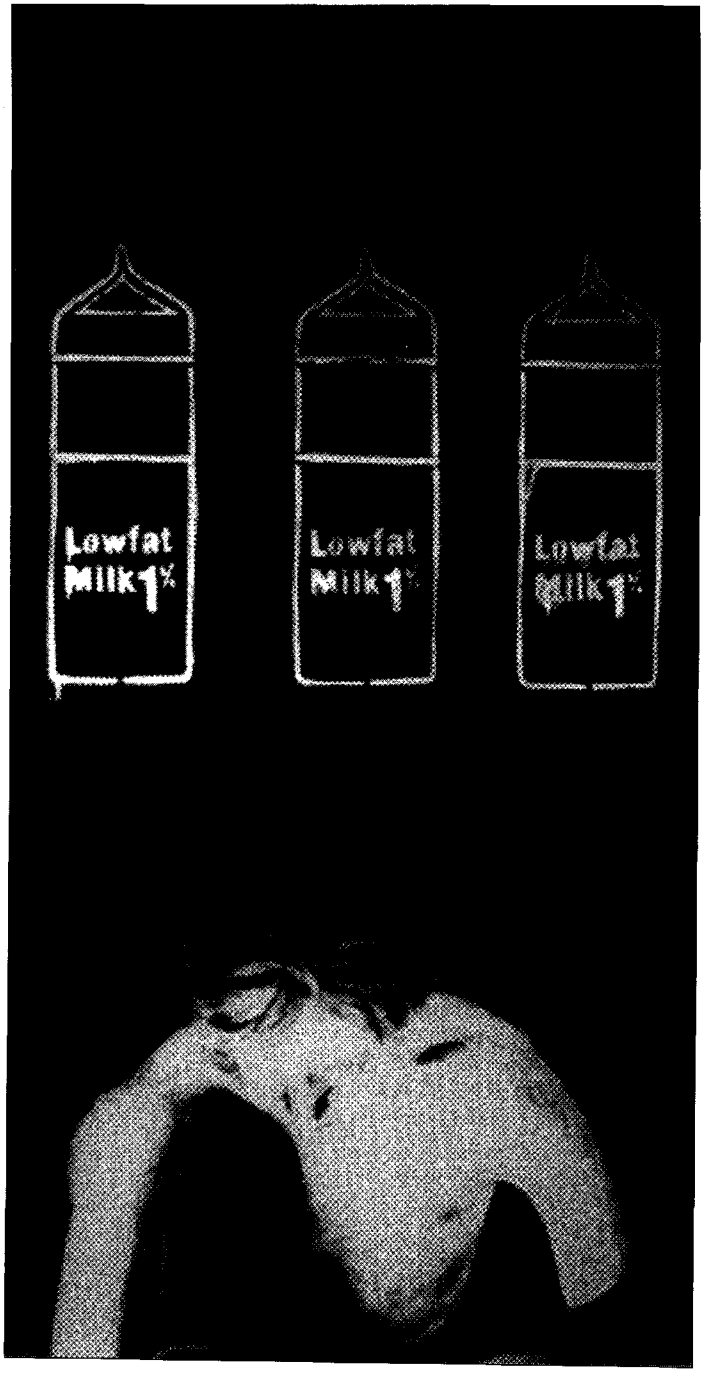
And when Lionel stepped off, he took the rest of us with him. The Samuel Coleman Quartet became one person with eight hands and forty fingers all working to hold him up out there, to keep him steady and bring him safely home.

Bart leaned against that pillar where I first spotted him, and he smiled at me. Not his knowing smile, but a broad welcoming one. Where we were, he'd already been. He'd been waiting for us. □

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Way You See It

A Story by Sherrie Flick



ADAM HANSEL

He's standing in my doorway holding a mason jar filled with milk. It's late and he has just gotten done helping his father milk cows forty-five minutes outside of town. He's holding the milk wrapped loosely in a kitchen towel. He's grinning. There, see him? I think he's beautiful standing there in my doorway, standing there like he's holding a special ingredient, like he's holding Frankincense, Myrrh—standing there like a lighthouse.

There are rocks and cliffs and the big choppy ocean. And I'm driving and it's months later and I'm crying as I see the ocean. And he is gone, and then I'm crying harder because there is no way an ocean should remind me of milk and cows and a man who smelled like earth and sweat and leaves.

But I can't see the ocean while I stand there in my creaky living room in Lincoln, Nebraska. I can only see the love that I think he's holding by bringing me this milk, fresh and so late on a week night—the TV murmuring in my living room, the sound of my neighbor's wind chimes one story down. My cat purring and rubbing against my legs, and then his legs, as he comes in and I give him a hug.

It's that December night one week before I get into my car and drive straight to New Hampshire, drive straight to the ocean and cry when I see it for no good reason. You can watch him, sitting there on my couch while I make him a drink in my kitchen. There's the one leg he has propped on the other and the cigarette dangling from his right hand. There's his anxiousness as he looks around my apartment, eyes wandering from photo to painting to coffee table to phone. He hasn't called in days. The radio bubbles some old country music. He's finishing his drink and then pointing to my Christmas tree lights, blinking and newly hung. He begins to say, "I hate the kind that blink. I never told you that, but I hate them."

He opens the door, and as he leaves, the cat gets out. I chase the cat, an excuse to chase him, and I hold her purring to my chest. I can't see the sleepless nights, but they're coming. And there I am shaking and shaking like the filament in the bulb just before it blows. And there I am washing my dishes and the water is running, splattering into the sink for minutes before I realize I'm holding a sudsy bowl—standing, staring in the living room.

But look; I'm held there with my cat squirming trying to break free from a grip I won't release. I see my breath as he rolls away, down my driveway. And I know, I have known all along, that milk is not a lighthouse, that a man is not an ocean, and love isn't something that comes knocking at the door late one night making one thing into all the difference. Love is an ocean pounding and pounding on the rocks, like Christmas tree lights blinking in a window, beckoning □

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mark Halliday

Two Disquisitions on 'Concepts'

1. LACK AND QUACK: THE DECREATION OF REPRESENTATION

What confronts the postmodern millennial poet is the lamination of tangents whereby intersubjectivity decreates the collectively perceived. That this has not yet been widely recognized only overdetermines the avoirdupois of the infrastructural substance that foments itself in the fictions of each intersubjectively dramatized foray. Let me illustrate. Every cultural observer has noted the anomalies which accumulate into clusters where access to the representational structures of reflexive referral in post-capitalist decline has been segregated toward a subset of the constituent producers of definition. Within this pattern, three secondary lattices of putative mutual enfranchisement may be isolated and isotopically framed.

(1) There is an effacement of the concept of epilogue that can be preëmptively expressed as textual emancipation if the discredited categories of "speaker" and "speakee" are shuffled with a view to their reciprocal violations of what Schwameuhl calls "the occasion of attenuation". This virtual effacement paradoxically frees the "birds" of closure to fly back to the "nest" of un-presocialized representation.

(2) The array of act and circumstance, and visible form, can be construed as mainly the province of passion. If so, then the chthonic manifesting of passion arguably prognosticates and articulates the boundaries of extravagant epistemology, rather than vice versa!

(3) Moreover, when "access" is distributed across the vectors of Dribividow's "exploding objectivity" or Marf's psychic inversion of down-behindness, we find a postponement of raveling, the same raveling that earlier was believed to "knit up" the topological emergences of pre-industrial sentimentality or "care".

Having established these quantum abrogations of potential scatteration of the topos of postcolonial inversions of vertical striation (what Nuff calls bottoms-and-tops-and-midriffs cubicle-analysis), under the aegis of our projection of arguable soi-disant "brimming" or emergent candidates for poetic representation, we have still at least five adjustments that must be interfellated before we can claim to have gazed into the "black mirror" of reflexive referral as an index of the undigested *clots* or *gobbets* in the strangely hyper-contestable arena of intersubjective anti-reductionist dream-wagon-offloading, or (in the language of a more naïve era) "poetry".

But perhaps at this stage we may profitably elect not to lay forth these five adjustments like so many anchovies on a salad. Let us postpone that enunciation and undertake in lieu of it, in its lieu, a more vigorously skeptical fingering of the core metalepsis implicit within the very sepulcher of pre-apocalyptic hierarchy. Then again, perhaps yet another avenue of inquiry will best melt and sublimate our otherwise engorged faculties as a provisional "hop" toward what slower minds call a "working definition" of the self-hybridizing and self-condemning obbligato of the poetry-producer who must soon eyeball the millennium. Let us consider the idea of superimposing a misattribution upon each zone of utterance within the constative realm (setting aside supplementarity, as that is neither "here" nor "other-where"), such that a given "speakee" might become inseparable from the conditions of receptive transvaluing which presumably obtained before the utterance began. If we do this, and who is to say we have not, then the rhetoric of deformation must soon become overridingly relevant, since the very notion or "hunch" of invoking misattribution in such a case inevitably spills all the most private fluids straight downward into the alleged speaker. Nuff said. It is not to be wondered that, in the gloaming of suburban post-intelligent crypto-modernism, citizens now transumptively identifying themselves as poets may soon prefer to mask themselves as comfortably non-signifying aquatic fowl.

2. EIFFEL TIME

On a summer day in 2007 I find myself near the top of the Eiffel Tower with my wife and my daughter and maybe a couple of friends. It's a cloudy humid day; I feel we should be having a Great Time but this is oddly elusive. Our feet are hot. My daughter wants to see a movie. A cloudy memory hits me and I offer it as interesting: "I was here once before, in the summer of 1967—forty years ago!" My daughter says, "You are so old." She is eleven.

Who was I with on the Eiffel Tower in 1967? Was it that good woman Madame Serizay, and maybe her son or niece? I can't recall. If Madame Serizay took me to the Eiffel Tower, I was politely trying to show interest in the history-of-Paris stuff she said. She was a friend of my mother's best friend, I think, and she was very kind

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

■

to me during my weeks in Paris. I was eighteen that summer. My self-cut hair pointed in many directions. Madame Serizay had a humorous no-nonsense manner. It was she who said to me, "*Vous savez bien vous débrouiller*," or rather I think she said "*Vous êtes très débouillard*," meaning that I was good at taking care of myself and dealing with difficulties. The remark stuck in my mind because I so much wished it to be true and deeply doubted that it was true. In 2007 I still wish and doubt.

Madame Serizay probably died in the 1980s. I don't know. I could have kept in touch, by way of charming postcards, but life was crowded. It was Madame Serizay who took me to the store where I bought a silver soup ladle for my mother. It was a hapless gift—my mother did not want a soup ladle—but I had no ideas, and Madame Serizay thought I should choose the gift by myself.

In 2007 I am narrating some of this to my daughter and my wife. I'm trying to make it amusing, but of course there's no interesting story in it. I refer to Madame Serizay as a woman with "philosophical freckles" and my daughter finds this faintly amusing.

I want to keep talking partly because suddenly I suspect my wife is going to reminisce about having been on the Eiffel Tower with some old boyfriend, some lover, in 1978 or whenever, and I don't feel like hearing this.

"And you know what else?" I say. "I think I predicted all this—I mean this, today, us having this conversation—in 1997, in something I wrote, a story I wrote."

My daughter rolls her eyes, doing her impression of Sophisticated Boredom. "*Ah oui oui oui*," she says, "the mysteries of time!"

She knows me. In her remark I hear my oncoming death! But since the year 2000, I hear or see my death at least four times per day. We gaze out upon Paris. I don't quite love the city, but I admire it. It contains a restaurant where, two hours hence, we may all be laughing. □

ROBERT THOMAS

Thinking About Sex

It's everywhere. The mystery of horns and hair.
I put on my black shoes in the morning. Blues
on the radio, fog burning off the ridge. Don't
you see it? No one promised it would do any good.
Like God, it's everywhere but some places more
than others: it has its tabernacles, its mosques.
You can smell it in old bookstores and new cars.
It likes windows and especially window coverings:
damask curtains, hook-and-slat shutters, Venetian blinds.
It loves black-and-white movies and Mediterranean colors:
Etruscan red, Naples yellow, Alexandrian blue.
It frequents all points of departure: piers, terminals,
lobbies, bus stops. It loiters in hallways and sidewalks,
knowing time is on its side. The redbird perched alone
on the longest branch of a red cedar is full of it.
The apple snail coiled in its pink shell feels it
in its slow breath as it crosses the pond floor.
You can hear it in the song of the diva and the metal-
on-metal shriek of brakes. A woman in a broad-brimmed
hat gets into a taxicab. A man holding a flashlight
walks across a bridge. Don't you see it? A white-masked
woman makes one incision and spares a bank clerk's life.
A man looks through a telescope at a comet that will not
come again in his lifetime. A woman dives into a river.
A man zips shut a suitcase. What are *you* doing?
Climbing the stairs to a room that smells of rosewater?
Turning out a brass lamp? All around you clouds are
forming and reforming, blown on a dry Santa Ana.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

■

A Man of Steel

When I got hired to work at TheGreatBigSteel Co again was another time I tried to change my attitude about life and just do something useful.

All I *really* wanted then was to be a valued employee of TheGreatBigSteelCo and eventually become a first helper in their open hearth and was even going to stop trying to write a book and stop going to see *HER* too.

An ad in TheHammondPaper said TheGreatBig SteelCo wanted to hire some men who would like to have a chance to become valued employees and work in the production department of their open hearth but because of my previous record there I almost didn't get hired again.

Bill Faulkner, their interviewer, only wanted to hire the men he was sure would *really* appreciate having a steady job and the chance to become valued employees and didn't give in and say he would give me one more chance and hire me again until I told him how much I had changed since I worked there before and what I would do in the future if he gave me a steady job too.

Going there with Lana on TheCity-Bus that morning I was only wanting to work there until I got enough money to go somewhere and write a book.

But when I got there the employment office's waiting room was already full of men, all of them really *anxious* to have a steady job and when I heard what some of them had to say about their lives I tried to change my attitude about life again.

When I got there the men weren't saying anything.

They were just sitting on the green wooden benches, their caps in their hands, watching Bill Faulkner.

Bill Faulkner was in his small office, smoking a pipe, drinking coffee out of a big white cup, and talking to a couple of cute girls who worked there too.

When he *did* look out into the waiting room the men just smiled and sat up straighter.

But when he started calling them in they began talking to one another.

Then they talked to each other about the places where they had worked before, the kinds of jobs they knew how to do, the best paying jobs they ever had, the hardest jobs they ever had, the dirtiest jobs they ever had, the kinds of jobs they wished they had, and how much they would *really* appreciate having a steady job.

One of them said he would *really* appreciate having a steady job because then he would be able to provide his wife and children with the food and medical care they needed.

"The cupboard has been kinda bare for quite a spell now," he started out shaking his head and looking down sadly at his worn out pair of SturdyWorkers then, "an' theys been no milk at all fer the babies.

"Theys been nothin' but jest dried beans and day old bread fer 'em all of late and the littlest one needs that special medicine now.

"An' the Missus has been ailin' too.

"The Doc up at the clinic says both her and the boy needs one of them long ocean voyages.

"The Doc up at the clinic says his fam'ly takes one of them long ocean voyages ever' year.

"The Doc up at the clinic says ever'body should take one of them long ocean voyage ever' year.

"The Doc up at the clinic says ever'body would feel a whole lot better if they'd all jest take one of them long ocean voyages at least once't ever' year but I jest caint do a thaing 'til I find work.

"Its shore been tough times fer the workin' man."

"Praise the Lord," he said when he got hired.

Another man said the place where he had worked for more than twenty years closed down and that all the employees there had lost their jobs.

"They just closed her down," he said, scratching his head and looking like he still didn't believe it happened then.

"One morning when I showed up for my regular shift it was just closed down and all the men was out of work.

"Then when I started gettin' behind in my payments they come and took back everything we owned.

"They come and took back the cars first.

"The Olds had a full tank of gas in it when they came and took it back.

"Then they come and took back the refrigerator, the stove, all our stuff in the kitchen, the new microwave, her four-speed blender and mixer, and the eight-slice toaster.

"They took back her kitchen cabinets too. Just ripped 'em off the walls and took 'em back.

"An' her dishwasher.

"They even took back the table, the chairs, the pots, the pans, the dishes, and all the stuff outta the new breakfast nook.

"Then they took back the couch, the love seat, the dining room outfit, her new drapes, her good silver, all her china and crystal, the washer and dryer, the bedroom set, her vanity, dresser, the encyclopedia books, the TVs, the console, and the brand new stereo.

"They took back the new gas furnace, the hot water heater I had just installed, the air conditioners, the humidifiers, her sewing machine, and the formica laundry tub covers.

"They took back the deep freezers and ice

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

■

cream machine, my guns and fishin' tackle, the pool table and record player, Buddy's fish tank and drums, the camera and projector, and the pictures off the walls.

"Then they come and took back the Hondas and the Harleys, the snowmobiles, Buddy's scuba gear and stock car racer, the outboard motor and sailboat, the tractor lawn mower, the camper, the trailer, the jeep, and Ben's pickup truck.

"Then they come and took all our CB equipment, the recorder and amplifier, the mahogany bar and stools, Buddy's Elvis records and souvenirs, Marie's organ, Sonny's 'lectric guitar, Pearl's piano, and Marie's wedding dress.

"They come and took back everything.

"They even come and took back Marie's wedding rings.

"Then they come and took back the house we was livin' in and the kid's pony.

A Chapter by William Penrod

"That kid, she liked to cried her eyes out when they come and took back that pony."

He said he had been looking everywhere, for months, for another steady job.

"If I don't find somethin' real soon and pay some of the back rent we owe on the place where we're livin' now the landlord says he's gonna have me and my family put back out onto the street again.

"I just got my second notice yesterday."

He threw his cap up in the air when he got hired.

All of them in the employment office's waiting room that morning said why they would really appreciate having a steady job.

Some of them had come from other countries, moved by the dream of getting a steady job at TheGreatBig SteelCo.

They cried when Bill Faulkner hired them.

When I *really* started wanting to have a steady job too I could *see* me being a first helper in TheGreatBig SteelCo's open hearth someday.

"Darling," Lana said when she finally *saw* me actually *being* responsible for one of the open hearth's roaring blast furnaces someday, "those are the *real* jobs and those are the *real* men in this world too.

"Believe me, darling, any woman would be thrilled to have one of those *real* men to call her very own.

"You know, they're not like so many I could tell you about, men who only pretend to be *real* men.

"Why, I'll even bet that this is the kind of work He wants you to be doing!

"Yes, I'll bet that is what He wants you to do! He sent you here!

"Doing a *real* man's job!

"That's what He wants!

"Go for it!"

But when Bill Faulkner finally called me in he started saying why he didn't want to hire me again as soon as I sat down.

"Your previous record here," Bill Faulkner said, puffing on his pipe like *the* Sherlock Holmes then, "isnt too very impressive!"

"That," I said, curbing him quick then, "is because I didnt know what I wanted when I worked here before.

"That was the problem then, but now I know what I *really* want.

"I want to become a first helper in the open hearth here someday.

"That's what I really want!"

"Well, " Bill Faulkner said, picking up the folder containing my previous record then, "it says here....."

"I know," I said, holding him close then, "but I won't ever do any of those things I did then anymore.

"I won't ever be late again and I'll always show up for work even if I'm really sick."

"Well," Bill Faulkner said again, puffing hard on his pipe and then disappearing behind the folder containing my previous record, "I don't know....."

I kept on telling Bill Faulkner how much I had changed since I worked there before.

I even used the power of my mind to try and make him hire me again.

You will hire me, you will hire me, you will hire me, I kept ordering him then, beaming that message straight through the cloud of pipe smoke that hovered over his head, commanding it to enter his right ear and burn brightly behind his eyes until he agreed to hire me again.

"You got through," Lana whispered once, "I think you got through."

"I know," I said.

"Well, all right," Bill Faulkner said, rubbing his eyes when he finally reappeared from behind the folder containing my previous record, "we'll give you one more chance.

"You can start tomorrow."

"You won't be sorry," I said, jumping up and shaking his hand then, "you'll see!

"You won't be sorry and when I get to be a first helper in the open hearth someday I'll even come back and buy you a beer!

"You won't be sorry!

"You'll see!" □

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

STEPHEN PERRY

Hit and Run

I was thinking of the old alchemists
dissolving the bodies of boys in limbics
to make gold, or jays hiding
on the shoulders of eagles to carry seeds
to the moon to fertilize light
or how anisette is compounded from aniseed
oil and the oil of bitter almonds, dissolved
in spirits, when the boy on his yellow bike
flashed in my headlights and exploded
in yellow sparks. His body in slow motion
hit the crystal of my windshield, wind himself,
beautiful as a little cupid without wings,
a striped t-shirt with a Homeboy sticker
of Alfalfa on his baseball cap—do they have
black angels, or do they sweep the bricks
to the heavenly gates—he hit with his face
and the spiderweb cracks of the glass
echoed the crack of his skull—I was listening
to Bach on the radio, the Brandenburgs again,
the harpsichord solo, it sounded like that,
tinny, as if a string had snapped—I heard
him roll over the top of my car, bounce, bounce,
bounce, bouncer, the sky had a heart,
not like that creep in the Ebony Bar,
they look strange caged behind the pawnshop bars,
but he gave me 12 bucks for my watch,
and he was lying in the street in my rear-view
mirror, one wing broken, his tire spinning,
spinning what, gold from air, bosh

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

■

there's no such thing as avenging angels
or spinning the hair of little girls
into gold, shame he died a virgin, a swan
swimming in port, good port Callaway, deep ruby
tart taste, sorry they quit making it,
but sweetened with gin and anisette quite nice
to spice it with maraschino, not like the moon
which is opening its soul to accept his soul,
gold globe, fuck too much Catholic school,
wasn't Alfalfa on *The Bowery Boys*, Leo Gorcey,
the guy in the cap, wonder what ever happened
to him, poor kid, small as a flea in the road,
may as well not go back, call the paramedics
at the next light, almost as if it happened in
another life, streets running with milk and honey,
awful thought, make it Cuervo Gold or Grand Marnier
or Hit and Run, who says the angel of death
doesn't have a soul or a sense of humor, ironic
that, Mothers Against Drunk Drivers sticker
more appropriate on his hat, spinning toward
the gutter like a wheel. No cops in sight,
probably getting smashed themselves, oops,
watch out for the telephone pole that wouldn't do
at all, jumping out to get me like another kid
on a pogo stick, sickening that crack though,
like I dropped a snifter of Grand Marnier, made
with the finest champagne, stop already
there's nothing you can do, he's dead, dead
drunk, there's nothing you can do.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

GARY KELLEY

A LINE IS A SERIES OF POINTS

A Story by Ken Kalfus

The morning opens with a song that has never been heard before. It rises from the sands like heat and descends upon the head of the column. As the song ripples back along the spine of the march it is transformed, with added lyrics and a more complicated melody.

This is the song just before it reaches us:

"The road lies beneath
And soars above.
Hummmma-hummm.
We walk the road only in part."

Then the song washes over our section of the column and we add to it:

"The road is a line.
A line is a series of points."

Our voices rise, mix and negotiate a harmony, reminding us that we are a people. And then the song leaves us. We close our parched lips. The song is picked up behind us, slightly altered, so that it has an extra beat in every other line, plus a refrain. The refrain is:

"Shumma shumma shummm..."

And then the song is gone forever, just as our footprints disappear into the sand every night.

No one can say precisely how long we have been walking or what fraction of the earth's surface we have traversed. We have walked long enough for many of us to have married and borne children; also, enough time for others, embittered by the rigors of the march, to have divorced, even though they continue to walk on parallel tracks. Our old and sick die every night and are left behind every morning in unmarked, unrecorded graves. Once we turn our backs the ground behind us appears undisturbed. Aid workers often ask us who our leaders are, or who sets our direction, or who decides when we should bed down for the night, or who decides when we should get going once more in the morning, or, at the very least, who can sign receipts for relief supplies. We can't reply to these questions with any certainty, or even say that we know where we're going.

When we left our homes we told ourselves that we would return in a few hours, once the fighting died down, or by the following day, or by the end of the week. We extinguished the lights in our front rooms without taking with us the memories of these rooms and we shut our doors without looking back, and we walked through our front gates without recalling the childhoods lived in our gardens and yards. Now we can no longer

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

■

recall what our homes looked like, or whether they were of clapboard or brick or built on one floor or two, or what time of day the postman made his deliveries.

We walk under a high thin sky that fades imperceptibly into the bleached terrain, so that we rarely see the horizon, and the flatness of the land hides the column's head, its tail and tomorrow's place of encampment. Some of us, especially the young men, run ahead to the front of the column, but they never return to report what they have found there. Others, such as the old, lag behind, and they too never return. Those who were ahead of us and then fell behind until they reached our section of the column speak of the head of the column with some authority, but their gossip is always stale, like the data borne by the spectra of stars hundreds of light years away. They can't tell us anything about the territory we're about to enter because they haven't been there. They aren't actually moving back to us: we're catching up with them.

News instead comes from our songs, which always roll back along the column from its head:

"The shadow of a creek,
The thorn tree's fear,
A sand grain's memory.
We turn left at the grassy hillock,
The trees are stripped bare."

Jetliners rumble above the desert, making the twice-weekly Manila-Bombay-Almaty-Dakar-Montevideo run. Many of us pause for a moment, if only to enjoy the spectacle of something in the sky besides the sun and the stars. Children wave. Perhaps the passengers look from their windows and observe the black river snaking through the dead lands, and they may idly ask themselves the name of the country they are flying above. Sometimes a jet will leave a vapor trail that beckons like a road sign.

Late every afternoon a line of disturbed air in the distance runs parallel to the column's march. Dust devils dance against the haze. What first appears to be a black claw scraping at the edge of the earth resolves into a small fleet of all-terrain vehicles. Before night has completely obscured the desert, a settlement of tents and vans has sprouted around us, populated by relief workers. They are handsome men and women with large, white teeth. Unfortunately, they're often in much worse health than we are, afflicted by mosquito bites, sunburn, frostbite, diarrhea and dehydration.

We offer them our traditional remedies. When we wake at morning twilight they're gone, only to reappear at our next stop. Or perhaps they're not the same relief workers: we never recognize individual doctors or nurses.

Within the column itself we are without advanced medicine, not even aspirin, nor gauze for bandages, nor syringes; whatever the relief workers leave is stolen or misplaced. Beyond our sight, traveling parallel to our column and the aid mission, is a kind of mobile village founded by merchants who sell the stolen relief supplies to the indigenous population and the local authorities. Hospitals and clinics in the countries through which we pass momentarily prosper and life expectancy figures surge. They subside after we move on.

It's said that the financial capital generated by the sale of these relief supplies has established *another* traveling village several kilometers further beyond the horizon. This village caters to the personal needs of the relief workers and the merchants in the first village, with restaurants, an appliance store and a drug store. This is only a rumor: all we know of the countries through which we pass is the sand directly beneath our feet. Other rumors suggest additional, more elaborate commercial centers tracing even more distant paths through the desert.

Some of us have bedrolls and mess kits, others nothing more than the shirts, trousers and running shoes that we were wearing when we left home. Some walk barefoot, the skin of our feet as tough and brittle as bark. At night we repair our clothes, using for material empty sacks stamped *Red Cross* and *UNHCR*. By campfires up and down the column we hear prophecies of our destination: its green fields, its trout-filled streams, its gleaming cities. The place does not have a name, or if it does our seers are afraid to pronounce it. Naming the place would limit it to a point on a map that not a single one of us possesses. It would make the place merely a finite number of square kilometers, with a finite history and a finite future. To name our destination would turn our shamans into politicians.

The ground is hard and the nights are cold, yet our sleep is always restful. Once the relief workers have left and the campfires have burned down, the column is quiet. A few infants cry out, but they are quickly comforted. An elder snores; another's bones dully clatter as he stumbles down death's staircase. We reach out to each other to make love. The stars wheel above us.

On another day a rumor, or a story, or a tale, or a song, passes along the column:

"Humma-humma-humma.
The breeze that isn't the wind.
The echo beneath the sands.
The sky that darkens the day.
The flames that sear the night.
Hummmmmm.
An angle is the figure generated

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

■

By the intersection of two lines.
Listen."

The rumor is this: another column of refugees, from another country and of another race, is also traveling through the desert, in a direction that may bring it into collision with our column. Some of us predict war and we take from our packs any implements that could be employed as weapons: spoons, sewing needles, sharpened keys to abandoned automobiles. Our would-be defenders are derided: what do we possess to fight over? Nevertheless, the possibility of another people like us has disturbed even the pacifists: the one thing we thought we possessed was our *uniqueness*. We believed that we held claim to the sum of the world's sympathy; that we were paragons of misery; that ages hence poets would employ our travails as a metaphor for all kinds of alienation and displacement. It is unbearable to consider now that there may be another people, in equal distress or in an even worse situation, with whom we must share our symbolism.

This rumor is soon countered by another: indeed, we are the only refugees remaining in the world. Everyone else has reached their homes. The world refugee problem has been completely solved by the same kind of practical science and political determination that eradicated the smallpox virus. We are merely the exception or, like the smallpox germs that are kept frozen in a laboratory vault, we are the remnants of an epidemic being preserved for future study. The world will keep us homeless, if only to remind itself that there were once refugees.

And then there's yet another rumor: no, there *are* other columns of refugees, thousands of columns, everyone is a refugee. We are all lost, no one has a home—certainly not the exhausted relief workers nor their superiors in Geneva and New York who fretfully track our passage on satellite photographs. The passengers riding the vapor trails above us will change planes disoriented and hungry, unsure whether the gray dusk outside the terminal belongs to the morning or evening star.

For weeks we sing of the approach of the other refugees. The songs become more precise in their definition of the others, as if we are molding them from our own music. We dream of the others: sometimes they are as beautiful as children, clad in robes of silk. Other times we wake in fear, chilled by the night. In the day our pace quickens, even though we're unsure whether we're hurrying toward comradeship or battle. And then one morning the other column appears perpendicular to our line of march, coming directly at us. Head on, it's impossible to gauge its size or distance. We stop and face them, our legs as heavy as stone, and the morning stretches into evening dusk as the two columns tremble before each other.

And then they arrive in a frenzied rush and we realize, as we raise our hands in wary greeting, that this is the head of our own column, which has somehow circled back to cross the column's center. There is chaos for a quarter of an hour and then the renewal of old friendships, reconciliation and great song-making that lasts well into the night. By dawn the column has reorganized itself and resumed its course.

We hardly recall the place from which we came; all our songs refer instead to the place to which we are going. It is for this reason, and because we had been looking the other way when we departed, that none of us recognize the approach to our own country. Now we cross the river that we once called Mother and file into the valley named Heart and pass along the outskirts of the capital city that was once the vessel of our young people's ambitions. We know we're here. No one says, *this is home*, but our songs are replaced by a steady, wordless susurrus.

As we pass through villages and fields, the country's inhabitants halt their work. They don't speak, but merely stand by the side of the road, leaning against their farming equipment. Their faces are hard and their pitchforks look deadly. We file along, careful not to jostle each other out of the column. Some of us believe we recognize our former homes, but the recognition is as faint as the illusion of *déjà vu*. People come to the windows and stand in doorways and we think we see our nephews and sisters-in-law, but we're not entirely sure. They offer us nothing in their slate-gray eyes. It is as if they don't see the column at all.

And now we're not sure we have really recognized either them or this country. These street names are unfamiliar; this country's climate is drier than we thought the climate had been at home; its music relies more heavily on electrically-amplified string instruments; its macaroni dishes are undercooked; its children's tales revolve around a small, cunning pig, rather than the small, cunning rabbit with whom our children slide into sleep; we don't understand these people's jokes or their football strategies; they make love in postures we would find either uncomfortable or repellent; the billboards on the side of the highways leaving what we thought were our former villages are not in our own language, which has in the years of exile taken on the rhythms of the march and the grammar of the desert. In any event, tomorrow we will be somewhere else. □

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MATTHEA HARVEY

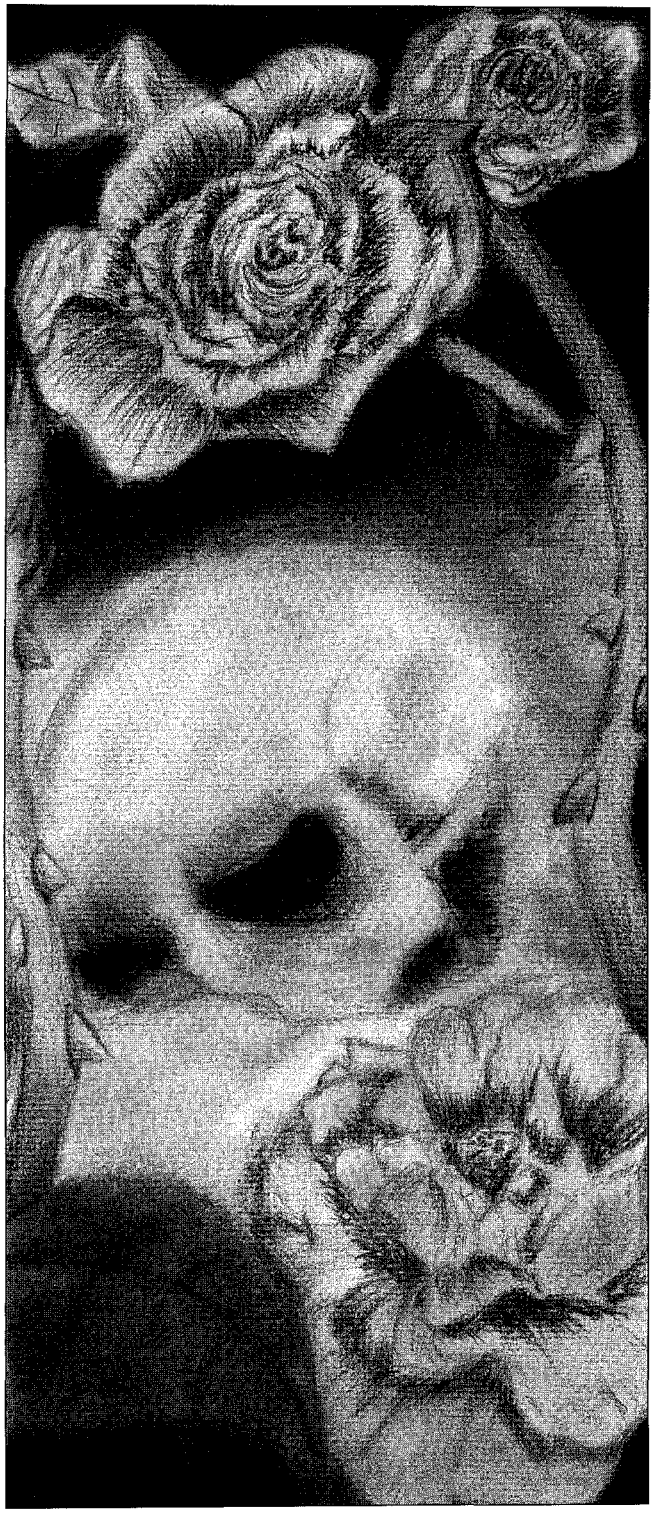
Outside the Russian-Turkish Baths

A fragment of speech cuts through the thick night air—
How dare you? mutters a young man on the bath steps
to the older man beside him. Gone is the shared shedding of
clothes amidst the clang of lockers, the slow slipping into
a pool of shallow water, legs lolling on warm tiles. He looks
pleased to see color and assumptions draining from
his companion's face. A child surveys the street for a lost toy,
goes inside slamming the door, two stories up a stereo
shuts off as a young woman settles down to sleep, a siren spirals
away down Second Avenue and it is quiet. The two men
now standing in anytime, everyplace. The older man's confusion
becomes wonder, the younger's malice, delight; they are master
and apprentice in Venice realizing they have finally discovered how
to take all the color out of glass and make it clear. They,
who have seen the dull red of the lover's cheek as it turns away from
sleep towards morning, the dense green of a forest encircling
a mountain, a room speckled blue by sunlight as it filters through
a vase, have spent a lifetime wanting to take it all away.
Impossible to tell what is loss, what is gain. Impossible to know
what warrants celebration. The old stained glass windows
still sparkle with saints and miracles, but the man who made them
carried slivers of glass in his fingers until the day he died—
some days feeling blessed by their glistening, other days raging
at not being able to press his wife's hand in his.
The streetlights come on. One man looks longingly at the damp curl
his fingers have been told not to touch, the other scans
the street for a taxi. Neither notices the steam that swells up
from the bath's underskirts and mixes with the fog.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE GHOST IN THE GARDEN

A Story by Ann Townsend



I haven't forgotten that face, lost, in the sandy soil of Marie Anne's perennial border. I broke the chalky patella with the tip of my spade that day, thought "another rock," and flipped it to the border's edge, where it rested among the weeds I pulled. Then I looked again at the abraded soil. I thought an animal, maybe a pet, to be buried so deeply among the old roses. But when I smoothed soil away from it, the eye sockets gazed out of the dirt, the small, delicate teeth bared themselves to my spade.

Only palm-sized. My husband and I shared this border with our next-door neighbor. We put in our time every spring and summer, dividing iris and phlox, trimming back dead wood from the roses. The day I found the skull, Marie Anne sat reading on the deck in her wheelchair. Her eyes were shaded by sunglasses. I waved. She waved back. I left the baby's head looking up into the spring sun, and began to pull wild strawberries from the bed.

She started declining two months ago, just after I killed my husband. Then she relied on a cane, and was hobbling to get her mail when I drove up with the doctor. She took one look at him, climbing self-consciously up the steps to the high porch, and said "*He* looks like fun." She leaned on her cane. I said, "He's a doctor." "Congratulations," she said. I felt that I had been slapped.

In the gated community where I live, people find a few ways to make excitement. They race their cars past the guard at the entrance gate. They drink vodka and pee in neighbor's bushes, or swim naked in their swimming pools at midnight. They make fun of the tourists, who stand around outside the gates and look in. Maybe famous people live here, they don't know. There's no crime to speak of, except a few errant firecrackers popping at the pavilion on the Fourth of July, but we're all afraid anyway. When winter settles wetly onto New Orleans and the older residents fly to Arizona, those of us left over break out our booze and lie back until spring. I'd been asleep since February.

That day, I threw the trimmings into the wheelbarrow. Her yard man would bag it up later. I wiped my clippers on the grass and tucked them into my shirt pocket. I reburied the yellowed skull and brushed off my hands. I called to her as I walked up the incline to the low deck, and she gestured to the other chair. "Sit down," she said. "Pour some tea." I did, lifting the lightweight plastic jug and adding ice from a cooler at knee level. She had it set up so she wouldn't need much help, but still a nurse from the hospice drove out every morning and evening, to get her dressed and bathed.

"How long did your mother live here?" I asked, my eyes on the flower bed. You couldn't see a thing from the deck.

MANUEL MACIAS

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

■

"Oh, forever," she sighed. "My grandparents bought this house years ago and when I was a child we came into town for the summer, then finally moved in year-round. Then when Mother died, I got it. No one else wanted it. You can see why. I keep waiting for it to fall down around me." I listened, tipping the tea into my mouth. My husband used to tell me stories about the generations of old women who inhabited this house, their fragile French antiques and interior manners. They all lived together, generations of them, and Marie Anne was the last.

My right knee was jiggling against the cooler; I couldn't slow it down. Marie Anne lifted her tea to her lips. She needed both hands for the plastic glass. "My mother and I planted those roses many years back. They were her pride—all the latest hybrids, some Bourbons and gallicas." She gestured to the garden and laughed. "Did you see the tags?" I had. They had the names of cars and country music stars and American presidents, neatly brailled on metal tags tied onto the most mature stem of each rose.

"We had to cart dirt in from Baton Rouge to add to the lake soil—my father was furious. It cost a lot, I remember that. My dad, he never saw the point."

"You want me to spray them?" I asked. They were due for it, the stems buggy and the leaves showing the first signs of blackspot. Roses grew badly here. Too much humidity. Her father was right.

"No." I watched her face go through a change that suggested she was embarrassed.

Finally, she said, "My holistic healer says it's not good to be around pesticides when you have an immune system disease. I want my body to be pure. If that's even possible." She grew red, then gray, as if saying this had taken its toll in color from her body.

I nodded, as if I knew what was wrong with her and sympathized with the treatment, though she had never told me. I assumed it was cancer, common here because everyone eats the lake fish. I had a whole new set of ailments to ponder now. When I looked down at my drink, she said, "Herbal tea."

"You ever have any pets here?" I asked her, my eyes following the ragged green lawn down to the perennial bed.

"No," she said absently. "Mother never would have a dog."

I left her then, with the promise that I'd bring organic bug controls for the roses next time. A holistic healer, I thought. This was a new component to add to the picture I held in my mind, to lay on top of the spindly French furniture in the front room, like a palimpsest. I went back once more to the flowers, kneeling to find my Felco shears, and pressed the little skull even further beneath the dirt. Even though no dogs roamed this part of the street, I didn't want anything to find the softball-sized cranium and cart it away. I wasn't ready to tell Marie Anne what I had found. Instead, I wanted to find it myself again, the next time I dug down into the amended soil.

I lived alone and the house was always quiet, except on the maid's days, or when the man came to mow the grass. This solitude was new to me, and so I became alert to the sounds the house made. It creaked and bumped, as if someone might be creeping through, just beyond my line of sight. That night I tossed down the paintbrush and walked through the many rooms, to be sure once again. It was my habit to look under the bed before I slept, to check the closet doors, to jiggle the locks at least once.

My hands were wet with the paint. Living alone, I knew no one could ask why I painted the walls when the perfectly good handyman came once a week. What was I covering with the cream eggshell finish? No one asked. The house grew whiter and whiter. Why did I apply the caustic refinishing chemicals to the old chairs in the dining room? What was wrong with the way they'd always been? I'd often stay up all night. Maybe that's an exaggeration. I'd want to stay up all night, I'd have the ambition for it, but my body would rebel, and I'd crash on the couch. I ate candy for breakfast, and cereal late at night, high on paint fumes. Or, windows open to the wet midnight, I'd crunch malted milk balls and drink hot tea. I'd breathe in a cocktail of sugar and acetone and wash it all down with caffeine. Pacing the upstairs rooms, I'd notice the small details that drove me crazy. A scuff! Old chair missing its inlay! I'd go on a whole house search for the inlay, I'd get out my little scrubber for the scuff on the wall. Then of course the rest of the wall looked dirty in comparison, so why not wash that down as well? Get the extension ladder!

The doctor told me I was a little anxious, for justifiable reasons. He gave me the number of a shrink. He folded a little prescription notepaper, with her number on it, into my hand, as if he was being discreet. He wore mousse in his hair, the kind you smooth on when your hair's wet and the comb tracks stay put all day long. He was my husband's cardiologist; he probably had no business prescribing anything for me. I told him he was cute, for a guy in white clothes. As I tucked the paper into my pocket, I cried and laughed at the same time, partly in embarrassment and partly because he really was cute and that made me feel even worse. Those tears led to lunch with him, and later, dinner.

The dining room walls were nearly blinding white with the new paint. How a room transforms itself from staid paneled walls, flocked wallpaper into this no-texture-all-light space! I laid down my brush at the door-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

bell's chime. It was the doctor, I was pretty sure. He often wandered in this time of night, off his rounds at the hospital. Besides, he only lived down the street. I was hardly a detour. "Where's your wife?" I said in welcome. He sat down on a just-refinished dining room chair and looked around at the transformation. Light and shadows changed the planes of his face, made his tired eyes almost translucent. "She's dead," he said. "I killed her."

"Very funny," I said. This was a sore spot between us.

"No," he said. He yawned. "She's at home. Probably waiting for me. It's the wife thing, you know. Let them serve who only sit and wait, or something like that." They had two kids, half-grown. She was a serious mom. She hated my guts.

"I think you're very tired," I said. "I'll make more coffee."

He rubbed his hands through his hair, ruining the mousse lines.

In the kitchen, I boiled water. My husband liked instant, and the stale Maxwell House sat atop the stove in a glass jar, scoop-out teaspoon still wedged inside. I hadn't yet thrown this away. I checked out my reflection in the window—covered with a fine spray of paint, in my hair, on my hands. I stirred enough of the dusty coffee for both of us. Shivering from my sugar high, I yawned. The doctor calls this a stress reaction, a way to get more oxygen to the brain. I yawned again, my mouth wide in the dark window's reflection.

He wandered into the kitchen, caught me with my mouth open.

"I get lost in this place," he said, palming some pills onto the kitchen counter. "This'll wake you up. I've been eating them all afternoon."

"What are they?" I asked.

"Just another way to say coffee," he said, reaching for the steaming cup in my hand. I yawned again.

He's good for pills. You ask him a question, he gives you a pill. I have been thinking lately about the ways I've said, yes, this is my life. How did it come about? How did I find myself saying yes to malted milk balls, mood altering drugs I can't identify, a dead husband, a skull interred in a garden? It's a soap opera, and I'm standing outside of it, holding a paintbrush, smears of paint on my hands. There's nothing to stop any of it from happening. This is to say nothing at all of all the money in the bank I'm left holding. What to do with that?

"Maybe I should join the Peace Corps," I say, for the lack of anything better in my head.

"That's definitely the sugar talking," he said. "Let's go to bed."

Much later that night, shivering, cold toes touching his beneath the duvet, I said, "I hate to sleep alone."

From the dark: "You have to, you know. Everybody does, eventually, finally."

"What is this, your homily of the evening?" I asked.

I was dizzied by the darkness, wide awake even after his kisses, in part because I still felt irretrievably married. There's a third body in this bed.

Leo died two months ago, not in this bed but in the back yard where he'd been putting up Mardi Gras decorations, lining the trees with colored lights and hanging beads everywhere. I hated all that crap, and though he kept telling me I was too refined for my own good, it didn't stop me from following him from tree to tree, resisting all the way.

"Whoever thought of purple and green together in one fashion hemisphere? What were they thinking?" I said, while Leo hung a streamer from the branch of a skinny birch, its white paper bark like a ghost against the garish colors that danced around its limbs. He laughed.

"You're on a tear. And for what? You hate the thought of the parties you'll have to dress for. You hate the people, and their clothes. You hate the conversation. We've been on this road before."

"So let's get off," I said. It was always better, just us two. Throw any more people into the mix and strange things started happening. Tensions. Competitive discourse. Conversation as one-upmanship. He liked to show off his knowledge. Plus, who knows how to speak the language of parties? Is there someone out there who does?

He paused on the ladder to steady himself. He held a green streamer high above his head, wavering between one branch and another one, closer.

"Which do you think?" he asked, and then he laughed. I always thought he laughed. Perhaps he didn't laugh. Later the doctor told me heart patients should never hold their hands above their heads for long periods of time. "Hard on the heart," he said, unhappy in his cardiovascular knowledge.

I woke alone in the sun-splashed bedroom and rolled over onto the doctor's half of the bed, his scent still in the pillows. Not that I wanted to smell him, but there's something good about waking with the memory of the just-departed saturating your senses. He would never leave a mark on my body, so I have no physical signs, only this bedroom smell, a mixture of sex and sleep and hospital anesthetic.

Later that morning, when I walked my casserole of macaroni and cheese over to Marie Anne's, what I expected was the morning cup of tea she had promised me, garden work, and perhaps the company of other neighbors, come to talk, to bring food. They bring their faces of normalcy and good health. That is what neighbors do in a crisis. They did for me, months ago. Now I

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

■

was entranced by the pace of crazy depression, how it ebbed and then waved forward. Mornings last week, after all my manic late nights, I never wanted to leave the haven of the bed. Now I ached to get my hands in the dirt, to smell the cut grass, its green wet viscosity.

She wasn't there, only a note that said "Doctor's appointment. Be back before lunch. Thanks." She left the door unlocked for anyone who might walk by, and I couldn't resist. I was one of those terrible baby-sitters who always snooped through business papers and suspect magazines, who ate the hidden candy and pocketed the wrappers, read the letters and examined the pills in the medicine cabinets. Marie Anne's house needed the remedial touch of someone like me, someone who hated wallpaper and all it stands for. I'd take a steamer to these walls. They haven't seen the sunlight and air in a good twenty years.

I examined the mail, the bathroom medicine cabinet, the contents of the refrigerator. Three things became clear—she was a vegetarian who stocked up on microwaveable soy patties and cheese tortellini; she took no discernible medicine except vitamins the size of horse pills; she received the same inspirational pamphlets from the Jehovah's Witnesses that I got last week.

When I wandered outside, the air was awash with the smell of the early tulip trees, with something else mixed in. It could have been the paint from my clothes, or the lingering smell of the oil refinery down river. Long ago, the city built the levees to save us from the periodic flooding of the Mississippi; we're walled in now, underwater, so to speak, the levees rising above us, the river at our feet.

People say that's why this town has its towering mausoleums and elaborate above-ground coffins—that you can't bury the dead in New Orleans, that the water seeps into the coffins and carries them away. After all, we're below sea level here. But Leo was buried as underground as it goes, in the small Catholic cemetery down the street, so I don't know where that theory gets us. Another elaborate lie, told on behalf of a lying city. I was wiping my hands free of garden soil when the hospice van pulled into Marie Anne's driveway.

The private nurse helped her out; Marie Anne slumped over, weakened, and the nurse huffed around the wheelchair, flipping the metal footrests down and stuffing Marie Anne's feet into their proper position. I've had it with sick people, I sometimes say to myself. I didn't want to be anybody's nurse. But I had the bad luck to stand in full sight of the driveway. So I helped them inside, offered tea, bustled, made nice.

"Do you want to go to bed?" the nurse said.

"No, just wheel me to the window, so I can see Rina outside."

"Okay," I said, "I'm going to work on those roses."

The hot sun on my back made me feel a little more alive. Weeding does that too—there's the illusion of perfectibility in the act. At the end of long labor, a brown and perfect skin of earth emerges. Weeding, you discard the large rocks, or find a home for them elsewhere, on a pathway, or driveway. But what was I to do with this skull?

Marie Anne and the nurse wheeled down the garden path, smiling at my busyness. The skull migrated. Why was I hiding it? Marie Anne seemed recovered, color back in her face, hair pulled back into a well-mannered bunch at the base of her turtleneck. It was warm in the sun, but they all dressed like the least breeze would kill. It's readily apparent I'm no Southerner. Even the nurse wore a windbreaker.

"You'll freeze, girl," the nurse said.

"I'm from New Jersey. Feels like summer to me," I said, smoothing friable dirt over the teeth of the once-child.

"I heard you had a loss," she continued in her professional hospice talk, the preserved voice of the regular church-goer. It's the "get-it-all-out" routine. Talk about it, you'll feel better. Leo called them all professional friends—hospice volunteers, social workers, shrinks, priests. He preferred strong painkillers and alcohol. He knew who his friends were.

"You know," I said to Marie Anne, "I've never seen the roses looking so well. You must be feeding them something special. I always wondered about the old stories you hear—feeding the roses the heads of fishes for the calcium in their bones. Does that work, I wonder? Did your mother ever do that?" My palm covered the dirt that covered the skull. I felt the bonyness, like the ghost of a pain, beneath my hand.

"Any kind of fish?" the nurse asked, looking a little disgusted.

"Any kind," I said. "But catfish is probably what you'd get most around here."

"I don't get it. Don't it smell?" She looked absolutely puzzled.

"No," I said, my eyes on Marie Anne. "Anything you bury in the ground, as long as it stays buried, it won't smell. You might know it's there, but it won't smell."

Marie Anne looked right back at me, smiling politely. "Why? Did you find a fish?" One hand fiddled with the locking mechanism of her wheelchair. Her graying hair was slipping, working its way out of the tight band at her nape.

"Not exactly," I said, lifting my hand away from the dirt.

I can't figure, and I'm no judge of faces, whether she saw anything in the shape of the earth. I can't even remember if she looked that way.

Perhaps home is the place you fill with ideas of your-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

self. In that case, why was I peeling everything away? From this window, deep into the night, where wallpaper lovingly released itself to my stripping tools, I could almost see Leo still precariously balanced on the ladder I was now standing on. He was falling away from the birch tree, falling away from the streamers and tiny white lights he had placed so carefully into the trees. His hands, large and bony, splayed out as if to catch himself, as if to call from the air some solidity he could hold onto. I was here in the dining room and there on the grass, watching him fall from several angles. If I tried hard enough I could even see him falling from above; I was watching from the rooftop, and his mouth, from that angle, formed a perfect and surprised "oh."

The doctor called from his car to say he's not coming tonight. This marked the first time he's called in advance. His children need him— it's homework night. The rush and wave of the traffic filled the phone alongside of his voice, regretful, sober. I peeled another strip. I'm doing it all wrong—in the handyman books they say you must strip the paper first, then wash and dry the wall, then caulk and sand, tape and paint. I strip a section, then paint, leaving little scraps of paper beneath the new layer of paint. I can only handle a section of this room at a time. By now, one half is bright and glowing. The other half: strips of hanging paper, glue, shreds on the floor. I have begun to take the small pink pills he's prescribed for me.

By the time the rain began the next evening Marie Anne lay nearly comatose on her bed and I was well into the dirt. Constant momentum kept me breathing. Or the pills—they energized, and clarified, they made the speed of the night before seem only a prelude to the wild activity of the day. I could hardly contain myself. If I had half a brain, I thought, I'd call the doctor and thank him for hyping me up even more. Surely that wasn't what he had in mind. The garden never looked so good, dappled by the rain. I could smell the dirt, sour, raw, and yes, a little fishy. It smelled good to me.

The big picture window of the bedroom looked over the garden, and Marie Anne's bedside lamp was lit brightly. I imagined her watching me, her face lifted toward the rain against the glass. The nurse would be bustling around her, propping and fixing. The rain fell harder; my clothes took on an almost translucent quality. Perhaps she saw me in the gathering dusk. I knew then that I should go, leave the yard empty, so she could rest her eyes on nothing human. Then the nurse was beside me in the yard. She had come quietly, on padded feet.

She said to me,

"You're good for taking care of this garden. She doesn't have any family I can see. And she won't be on this earth too long. A couple of flowers and sunlight here and there makes her real happy. She said to me, you know, that girl's lost her own husband and here she is in my garden working away—"

I interrupted her.

"It's okay," I said. "I don't want to talk about it."

She stepped back, onto the brick path, but she was smiling. She said,

"It's raining. You should go home now."

I wanted tremendously to resent her sureness, as she walked toward her van, pulling her nurse's costume around her waist where it rode up. What I felt was deflated, as if the pills had worn off, leaving only the rain that washed away everything. I left the garden as it was, unfinished, but before I left I bent to pick up the tiny skull, the clinging dirt that came with it, and wrapped the whole mess inside my shirt, and carried it home.

Home, its quiet ticking emptiness.

I decided to walk to the doctor's house. For a long time, I stood at the edge of the driveway, where they couldn't see me in the dark. All was quiet, and the face of the house reflected a kind of mindless peacefulness. I tramped up to the house and looked in the bay windows of the living room. No life there. I walked around back, through the gate, and peered into the kitchen window. I wanted to stir things up. The motor on the swimming pool cleaner kicked on, sending a ripple across the rain-dappled water. They sat talking at the table. The children weren't there. The doctor wore khakis and a button-down shirt, untucked. He had on another face, one I'd never seen before. I was watching a moment of peace in a busy household, where the wife leans across the table to place another cup of coffee before her husband, where he reaches to take it and brushes her fingers with his hands. I shivered.

I still carried with me the little skull, no larger than a teacup and just as china-fragile, even covered with a generation of dirt. Marie Anne didn't know any of it, I wanted to believe. Marie Anne liked to look out over the green space that separated our two houses, and find some calm there.

When Leo fell, he landed on his side, on top of a big bag of Mardi Gras beads. It wasn't the ridiculous nature of his fall that kept me stapled to my place on the back porch steps. I wasn't laughing. I was trying to figure out what had happened in that thirty seconds, between what I thought was his tired laughter and what he'd fallen into, as the just-cut grass began to soak his shirt.

"Rina," he said. The bag of beads spilled from beneath him; they looked, in their multi-colored gaudy brightness, like many strings of intestines. I didn't

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

think that at the time, of course. Only later, when I dreamed it.

"Rina," he groaned.

"What?" I said from my place on the stone steps.

"Where are you?" he asked. He sounded confused, and I could hear him breathing, through his mouth. One leg slowly began to bend beneath him, as if he was swimming.

I walked across the wet grass gingerly, in bare feet. I knelt beside him and turned his face to mine. He had no color, no color at all. Perhaps someone else would have called his face gray. He was sweating.

"Is it your heart?" I stupidly said. The first anniversary of his bypass was only a week or so away. He blinked. Now at this point any other wife is crying for help, running for the phone, leaping into action. I crouched down and placed my palm on his forehead, as if he was a child, with a fever. My hand came away wet.

"What are you doing?" he said. "Call Dr. Jean."

I sat back. The morning's dew soaked through my shorts. Birds—I could hear birds in the trees, the raucous cry of the gulls near the lake. I could hear him breathe my name. A weight of tiredness shook me, and I lay down beside him, yawning. I was tired of the seasons that passed with their sameness, tired of his grave, tender voice, tired of tending to his illness like a slave. I could barely keep my eyes open. I turned my head toward him. His eyes were closed, he was breathing through his teeth. Then his voice, whispering my name, the last syllable an "ah" of pain, a note full of dying.

I shook it off, I shook him off. The rain had stopped and the night was dark with life—bugs, reptiles, roaming dogs, the rustling leaves in the trees. My heart was racing with what I was about to do. I unlaced my shoes in the glow of the lighted window above me. I stepped slowly into the shallow end of the swimming pool with the little skull in my hands. I pushed my hands beneath the chlorinated water until the dirt and crumb-like fragments of bone floated away, blue in the pool's submerged lighting. The skull emerged from its cakey coating, still yellow but whole now in its shape and size, and even smaller than before. Water rippled against my bare thighs. I laid my head back in the cool water and my hair fanned out. The palm trees that ringed the pool began to fan themselves in the evening breeze—the rain had slowly ended, but the wind remained.

I balanced the skull on my chest and began to laugh. What was I doing? The back door opened. The doctor stood in the doorway.

He said, "What? Who's there?" I shook my head out of the water and stood tall. I was at the four foot marker, dead center in the middle of the pool.

"Christ, Rina," he sighed.

"I don't know about those pills, Jean," I said. "I'm doing unusual things." I started to laugh again, but he waved me into silence, looking back into the kitchen.

"It's nothing, Lise," he called. A light snapped off in an inner room.

"Does she know?" I said. The baby's skull sat lightly in my hands. Jean's face told me nothing I didn't already know.

"So Jean, do you know the story about the way they bury their dead in Greece, on the old islands where no tourists go?"

"You came here to tell me a story?" He rubbed his face and sat down on the step.

"Here's what happens," I said. "The old one dies and is buried, but not embalmed. A year later, the eldest child digs up the body, wraps it in a cloth, and stores it somewhere out of the way—say it's the family barn. A year or so later, when the body has skeletonized, and it's all dried out—don't tell me you're grossed out by this," I said.

His face had completely lost that relaxed quality.

"You're standing in my pool in all your clothes telling me about the ancient dead. Want a beer? What the hell, maybe you want to come inside and tell Lise the rest of it?"

The rest of the story, what I never told him, I thought to myself much later that night. I discovered I really could stay up all night, that in fact there was nothing to it. I stepped out of the pool.

"What is that?" Jean said, his eyes startling at the skull in my hand. Or perhaps he thought it was a pool toy.

"It's not for you," I said, and off I went, dripping a little, down the narrow street, beneath the halogen security lights that protected everyone from the dark.

The son or daughter goes to the barn and finds the old one's bones. Perhaps they are stored high in the rafters of the barn. I don't know if barns in Greece have rafters. What do they call barns? Perhaps these bones have been wrapped in a winding cloth, or in a sheet pulled hastily from the family bed. Perhaps the bones have the thin translucent quality of water-washed stone, or maybe they look like the bones of any other animal, left to dry in a dark place. The daughter takes down the bony bundle from where it rests, and lays it on the dirt floor of the barn. Outside, birds sing in the morning. It has to be morning, though here it is deep night. As she unwraps the bones, she hesitates. This is ritual, and so must be correct.

The bones are brittle, but they have belonged to a mother or father, and so are beloved. They have no smell. The child traces the medulla with her finger-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

■

MICHAEL KOPACZ

What I Feel Like at the Office

Like an enemy. I am. A NEGATIVE PERFORMANCE ARTIST SEETHING WITH TRIVIAL ISSUES, DETERMINED TO RUIN THE CONFIDENCE OF THE NATION, THE CUSTOMERS, THE PUBLIC—all in all, A PARANOID PERSONALITY. In search of a signal peak, I founder, stranded on the waste coast among the ostriches, hyenas, spiders and elephants. I want to ignore them all and simply float away, but earth-like movements of culture call me to gravity.

The first tug I feel as the gentle, managerial art of nitpicking. Innuendo follows, then accusation, threat on a whim. In the daylight walking hours I am summoned to appear in the digestive lairs of bosses the way kings once summoned suspected traitors or imprisoned usurpers. On Friday afternoons and Monday mornings their apprentice head-nodders prowl the halls for me, panting and baleful as lions having sniffed a wound, a bleeding in the air. Unsigned confessions next, ostracization from happy hour, white collar noir. My phone beeps, grows too hot to hold whenever accusations blurt from my lips till I drop it screaming, my hand needing the comfort of ice. Did he ever philander, gamble, drink? If I can't stand the heat . . .

Other employees, their wives and children coaxed into deeds of reckless destruction, make a point of running into me in the hallway or at the shopping mall: the angle veers, they stumble as though drunken, then impact and my teeth are left to taste the wall till someone arrives to take a cast of my fossilized indignity. It's only Chinatown. If I do not cooperate, someone will be found who cooperates, not like me, THE LOOSE CANNON, THE KING OF SHAKEDOWN, THE UNSTABLE ECCENTRIC. □

tip, the fleeting indentations and small abrasions that mark a long life. She uncovers the hipbone, palms it, and feels a thickening, a kind of knot, and remembers her father's complaint, the hip that ached in the winter months. She sees his pain before her eyes, and touches it.

I took the skull into my kitchen, and wrapped it in a blue and white striped dish towel. In my right hand I brought a hammer down sharply against the towel. Against the hammer the towel collapsed, chastised. The skull broke into a million tiny pieces. It was like breaking up peanut brittle, or some other hard candy. In Greece they grind up the bones, but the article I read so long ago never said specifically how the bones are broken. I hammered and hammered until puffs of dust rose from the dish towel, and then I unwrapped it and looked inside. The teeth are the strongest part, it seems to me. At least, that was all that remained identifiable.

The dust of the loved one is plowed under in the family fields, and so becomes a part and fodder of the land the man had once worked with a plow.

There are no fields in New Orleans.

I put the ashes and teeth into a Tupperware container and snapped on the pneumatic plastic lid. The dishtowel went into the clothes hamper. I ran a sponge over the counter and it came up gray and gritty. I slid the Tupperware container into the refrigerator and sat down. From my kitchen window I couldn't see Marie Anne's bedroom window. Her lights had gone out in the time since I left her house to go swimming. I badly wanted a candy bar. I considered the rain, which had started again, a slow drip from the eaves of my house. I opened the window to listen and think about my options.

One: in the backyard, where Leo fell. Two: in Metairie Cemetery, where he lies beneath a formal granite marker, thin and elegant like him.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

■

But what good would that do the ground? Make the grass greener, the gardener in me said. But the grass is always green in this town. Three and four: mix it into the chemicals that clean the doctor's pool, or in his morning coffee, disguised as powdered creamer. He calls me a poor host already, serving him stale instant coffee in microwaved water.

I don't know where to scatter the ashes. But the rain calls me outside.

I worked quickly, leaning into the wind and rain, ash sticking wetly to my hands as I scooped it out of the plastic bowl and into the rose garden. The tiny brass markers gleamed on their stems; I couldn't tell where the ash fell, on "Peace" or "Dolly Parton" or "Boule de Neige." Marie Anne's windows remained dark, but at any time, I thought, the lights will flare on. What I didn't expect was her voice out of the darkness.

"What the hell are you doing? It's past midnight, Rina."

"Where are you?" I said. I was jumping out of my skin. My eyes slowly focused on a blur near the ground, on the path. She had forsaken her wheelchair and crept along the ground.

"What are you doing?" I said.

I set the bowl down on the ground and slapped my hands together to clean them. Shame was warring with something more lively in me. Part of me didn't care I was standing in her yard in the middle of the night while she glared up at me from the slippery path.

"You're going to get wet down there," I said. "You want help getting inside?"

"No. I just want to know why I had to get out of bed to scare off somebody who's not a burglar. I mean, this is very dedicated gardening. What is in that bowl?"

"Bone meal," I said.

I'm thinking, here are two educated people fairly loaded on pharmaceuticals having a polite discussion in the rain. They will never be able to say the truth.

"My mother and I buried that baby in 1962," she said. "Mother never forgave herself for it." She wiped the bangs from her eyes.

"I'm really high," I said, and sat down on the path beside her.

"It was an accident," she said. "My sister came home pregnant. She lost it. It was a tiny girl." She laughed. "God, I'm wet. What did you do, put it in a blender? There's not much there." She leaned over the bowl, picking out a tooth.

"It was just the skull," I said. "I'm sorry."

I was tired, but I wanted to finish. I dug the ash into the bed around the roses. Marie Anne sat on the wet grass. I felt her watching me, my hands gloved in sour lake dirt, its history, its accumulated strata.

"Help me up," she said. "I'm cold." □

LEE NYQUIST

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

HAWKS

A Story by John Lowry

The car shook on the dirt road. I hope they don't come, Jill said. I want to be alone. It's either them or no house, Tal said. The house appeared, a pine tree in front, green shingled, robed in a white balcony. There was no car.

A damp, musty smell swept past when they opened the door. Sunlight lit the living room, showing orange cracks in the leather couch, bald patches on the rug. A child's wooden train was drawn up in a circle.

They walked onto the deck. Vin's a hunter, Jill said. He kills innocent animals. Puffy clouds, dark bellied, floated on the horizon. There were soft crickets, the flapping of wings. Look, Jill said. Two birds, their wings motionless, circled over the house. Hawks, she said, smiling. Great, he said. Want to play tennis?

The Murphy's car pulled up to the tennis court as they began to play. Tal and Jill waved as they walked towards them. It's so hot in the city, they're frying eggs on car hoods again, Isabel said. She had been an actress. She was blond, small featured like a child. We're staying forever, Jill said. Vincent was thin, dark, his eyes gleaming and nervous. He was an assistant district attorney. I brought work, he said. My pleasure will be in not doing it.

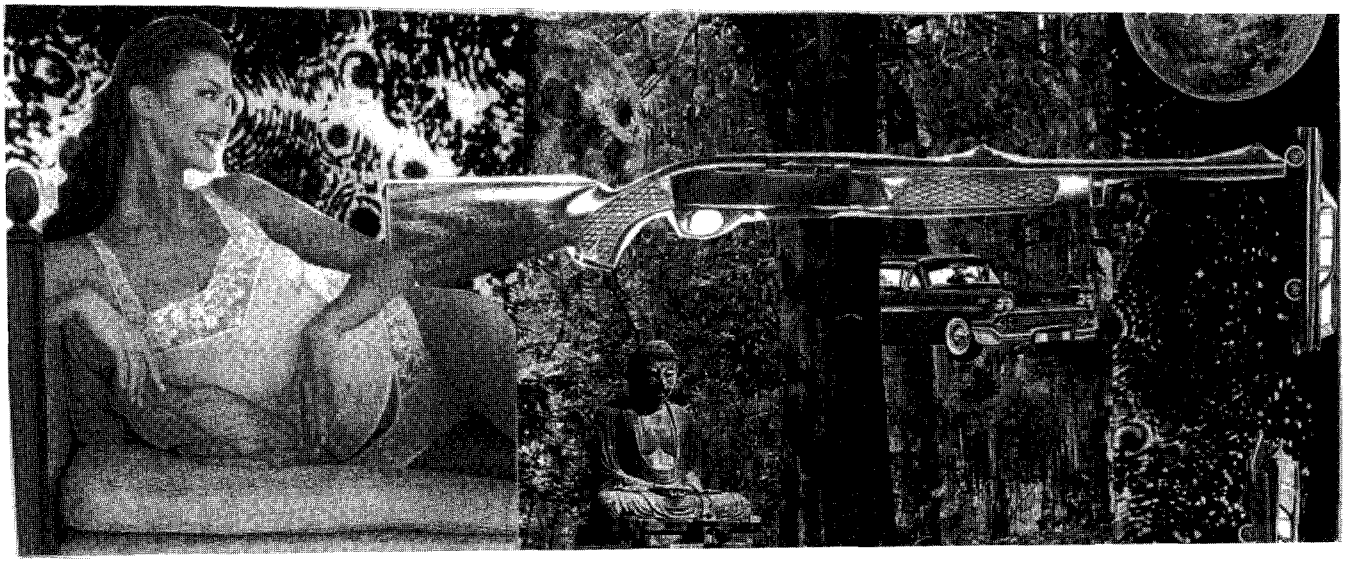
They turned back to their car. Catch you at the house.

Disappointed, Tal said? We expected them didn't we? Jill said. Exactly. Isabel is pretty though, isn't she, she said? She's really all right, Tal said. Oh is she? Jill said. And how all right is that?

Isabel was watching television when they walked in, her legs crossed, her hair pulled off her neck. A rifle sheathed in a leather case stood in the foyer. Did I tell you I might resume my career? she said, waving dramatically. Really? Tal said. Yes. Last week, I read for Robert Redford's agent. And he liked me. I told him, I'll do anything, but just because God made me a blonde doesn't mean he made me dumb. Look at that, Jill said. The television showed bodies floating down a river, a crowd watching from the shore. What is that? Isabel said. Mozambique, Jill said. There's a civil war. Vin came down the stairs and froze when he saw the television. Blow the place up, he said. I hate this, Tal said, I'm going to wash up. Isabel snapped off the television and walked to the kitchen. Jill, you and Tal want to join us for lunch? That would be nice, let me help, Jill said, pinning back her dark hair. Vin made a gesture. And me? You, Isabel said, you light the barbecue and don't burn down the house.

I'd love to teach, have the summers off, Isabel said, opening the refrigerator. What do you do? I read, I write, Jill said, taking plates from the cupboard. You writing a best seller? I write poetry, Jill said, blushing. I used to love to read, Isabel said. And now? I live the stupid life. The stupid television, the stupid VCR. She peeled open a package of frankfurters. Tal came into the kitchen, his hair damp, his sallow skin glowing. Tal, Isabel said, Vin's a pyromaniac. Would you see what's he's doing?

The barbecue was set on the end of the deck. Vin stood waving a piece of tinfoil over the coals. Fanning the flames, hey, Mr. District Attorney? Tal said. Heat is what I do best, Vin said, reaching for the charcoal lighter. Tal blocked his hand. Hey, let it alone. You got it going. Vin smiled. Corporate lawyers, you guys oil your shoes.



PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Jill here has the whole summer off, Isabel said at the table. Hey, Vin said, go for it. Of course, I got secretaries who can't spell. I had one who never heard of Michigan. Jill peered at him over her glasses. Maybe. But did you ever notice how many Wall Street crooks have degrees from Ivy League schools? Vin shrugged. Just telling you the facts of life. It all comes down to morality, Tal said. Values and decency.

Isabel patted her napkin to her mouth. When I started driving up here, she said. People were waving. Honking. I'm like, is my car on fire? Did I forget my clothes? Then I think, my God, they're just being friendly. Isabel, Tal said, you'll wake up tonight. I guarantee it. You'll say, what's wrong? There's not a ghost? Isabel said. I'm terrified of ghosts. Tal shook his head.

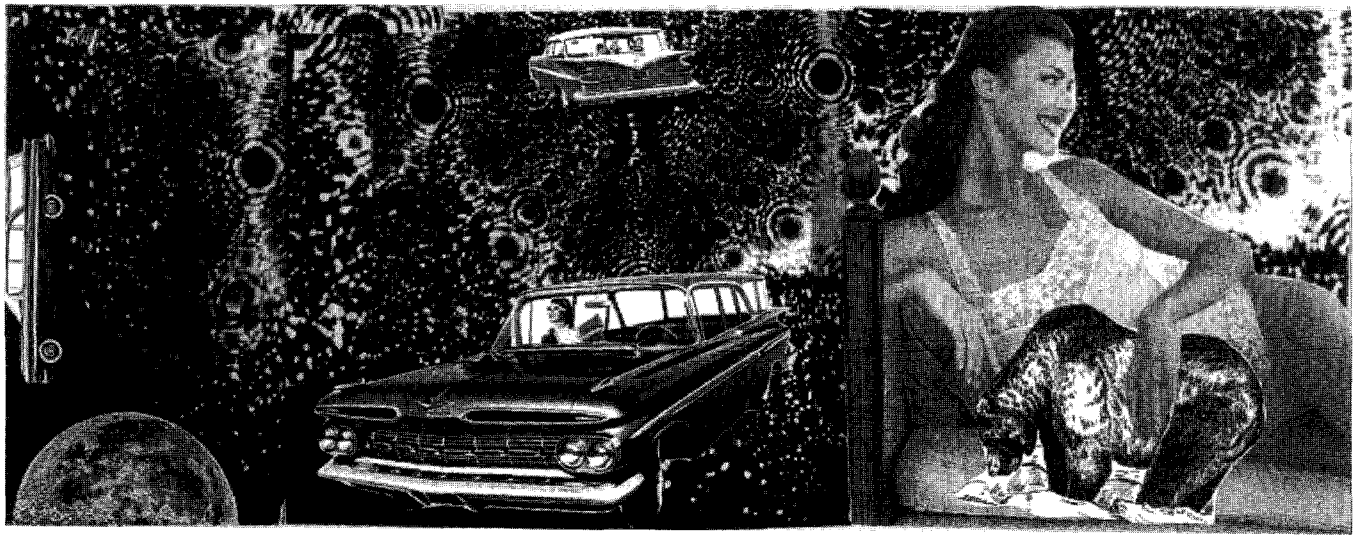
No, Isabel, the silence. The first night we stayed up here, I heard something. What's that? I thought. You know what it was, Isabel? A frog, way over on the lake, just showing off. Now that's silence, Tal concluded, leaning back into his chair. And today, we saw hawks, Jill said, making wings of her arms. Just wheeling through the sky, princes of the sun. You guys ski, Vin said, forking another frankfurter. You hunt? Absolutely not, Jill said. Hunting is immoral. Vin cringed in mock fear. I think it's O.K. if the herds get too big, Isabel said. Vin looked up at the sky. Want to hit a few tennis ball, Tal? You bet, Tal said. If you like, Isabel, we can take a walk, Jill said. Isabel hesitated. There aren't any snakes? No snakes, Tal promised, but wear your jeans and boots. There are ticks.

Two women wearing dresses and baseball caps were on the court, laughing and swinging their rackets like baseball players. Must be nuns, Tal said, leaning against the fence. We talking softball? Vin said. God, they're old. So what? Tal said. So what, Vin said, I'm making peanuts, that's what. I should get old? I should retire? Where? Sheepshead Bay? Greater Flushing? So quit, Tal said. Come over to my place. Yeah? Vin said. How about Jill? Your kids? Who's going to protect them from the predators? The women waved them onto the court. Have it your way, Tal said. Let's play tennis.

Vin floated the ball over the baseline, made short returns that Tal smashed for winners. Tal served rows of aces and spun a second serve that rode in on Vin's racket. Vin's serve fell long. When he double faulted, he shouted, banging his racket on the court. After he won the set, Tal walked to the net. I've been playing a lot, Vin. Don't give me that boy scout crap, Vin said, his face flushed. Just play.

Vin's serve began to catch the corners. He rushed the net, putting away Tal's weak returns. Tal waved his racket. You're foot faulting, he said. Vin cupped his hand to his ear. What? They walked towards one another. You're on the court before you hit the ball. A foot fault, Tal explained. What the hell you saying? Vin said. I'm just playing better. You got a problem with that? If I lose, Tal said, pointing his finger, I lose by the rules. No other way. Vin walked away, then whirled around. You want to play? Play it is, Tal said. Vin won the set, raising his arms in the air. Nice going, Tal said.

Tal drove slowly, humming to a cassette of the New World Symphony. Vin sat with his eyes closed, his arms folded. You guys want to see a movie tonight? he said. Tal slammed on the brakes. Look at that! A fawn stood by the road, moving his head from side to side before catching their scent and bounding off. Oh, man, Tal said, I wish Jill was here. He started the car. How can people shoot them? How can they do it? I'm a hunter, Vin said, I don't shoot fawns. Small favors, Tal replied. They pulled up to the house. Vin clapped him on the back. No hard



WILLIAM FRANCIS BISBEE

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

feelings, bud? Tal stared at him. Sure, I was foot faulting. But I was losing, man. It's just a game.

Jill sat reading on the deck. So, how was tennis? she said. Tal sat down. The guy cheats, he said, in a low voice. Mr. District Attorney cheats at tennis. Jill lowered her book. He told her what had happened. And wait, there's more. In the car, he tells me, sure I was foot faulting. But it's just a game. He plucked at the strings of his racket. Hope your walk was better. Jill rolled her eyes. You told Isabel to wear jeans and boots? How about shorts and sandals? All she did was complain. Something is biting me, something is on me. Tal told her about the fawn. Oh Tal, can we go back? Maybe he'll come again. Sure we can, Tal said. A full moon, the color of a plum, rose over the hills. They watched it climb past pickerel clouds, warming to the incandescence of candle light. Tal, I'm so happy, Jill said. Are you? Very, he said, taking her hand and kissing it.

She lay in his arms, stroking his cheek. Let's not tell them our plans, she said. Suppose they build next to us? No way, Tal said, kissing her shoulder, dropping the strap of her nightgown. She turned, kissing him passionately. A car pulled up and they made furtive love, listening to the Murphys tramp up the stairs, arguing in animated whispers. Jill closed her eyes. A white hawk dropped towards her, his eyes the color of fall.

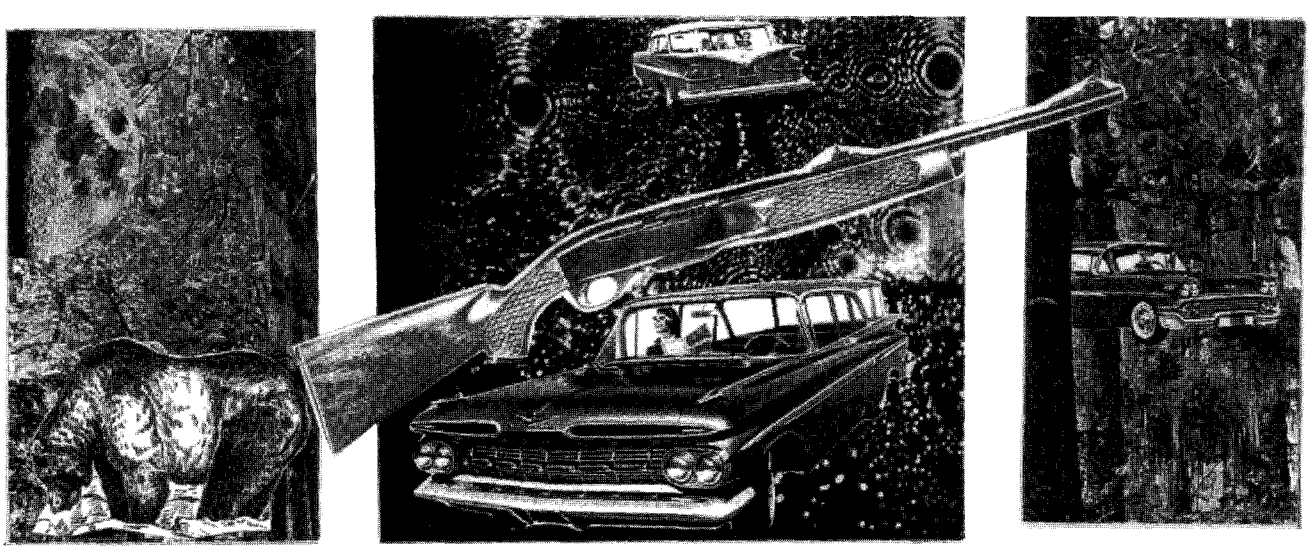
There were steps in the hall, a sharp rap on the door. Tal, wake up, Vin called. We got a prowler. They put on their robes and Tal opened the door. Vin stood in camouflage pants and t-shirt, holding his rifle, Isabel behind him in a football jersey. Someone's on the deck, he said. You hear it? A raccoon, I bet, Tal said, pushing the rifle aside. Yeah, but I'm not a betting man, Vin said. They went downstairs. No lights, Vin ordered.

They stood by the kitchen window. Tables and chairs levitated in the moonlight, falling into place when they glanced away. There, Tal said, pointing. A dark form held something that flashed like a signal lamp. Some bum? Vin said. A bear, Tal said, chuckling. Isabel suppressed a cry. He likes our tinfoil. He opened the door. Hah! he shouted, waving his arms. Hah! The bear ran into the shadows. Vin slammed the door. You nuts? We don't want him in here! He'll go away, Jill said, he's just hungry. And suppose he doesn't? Vin said, wheeling. Suppose he gets in here in the middle of the night? They don't do that, Jill said. They're shy. Should we fire a warning shot? Isabel said. Vin hesitated, his eyes darting around. Oh, for God's sake, Tal said, opening the door and stepping onto the deck. Jill called after him sharply. He walked rapidly, throwing back his shoulders, stopping when he heard a growl. The bear was curled against a corner of the deck. Tal raised his arms. Git! Git! The bear dropped his head to one side, baring his teeth and coming towards him. Tal felt a flush of heat. He turned and ran. He saw a flash, heard the side of the house explode. He looked back and saw the bear somersault through the air.

Vin walked towards him, lowering his rifle. That sucker was going to kill you. Tal tried to catch his breath. They walked to the bear, Vin pointing his rifle. He lay on his back, small moons swimming in his eyes.

Isabel threw herself at Vin when they came into the kitchen. Where's Jill? Tal said. She shook her head. He bounded up the stairs. We gotta talk, Vin called. This is going to be trouble.

She was lying on the bed. Tal stood a moment, wiping the sweat from his face. Jill, he said, sitting down. She averted her face. It was an old bear. He was sick. That's why he came around. He touched her shoulder. Jill, please! She sprang from the bed and stood trembling. I don't know you! she cried. I don't know you!. □



PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

WILLIAM VIRGIL DAVIS

A Death

The door must have opened when I wasn't looking.
It could have been the wind, or nothing at all.
Whatever it was, it took my attention, and I turned
Just in time to see something there, it too turning,
Going away almost before it came. I didn't know
Then, and don't now, what exactly it was or why
It came so close and then turned and went away
Without speaking (if it spoke), without in any way
Communicating what it was that had brought it,
Or why, having come so close, it turned away without
Any message left, in whatever form.

The day
Had been normal, ordinary, unmemorable, dull—
If truth be told—the usual things in their typical order.
When the phone rang, I was almost glad for some
Interruption, thinking, whatever it was, it would be
Diverting, maybe even something to save the day.
But, right away, hearing your voice, I knew it would
Need to be bad news, that nothing else would, could,
Have put you on the phone that late, after all these years.
And so, without any amenities, you told me, just like that,
That everything was over. I sat there for some minutes,
Thinking back, putting it all back in place, this history
Never written, history that now was dead, and now
Only, at last, alive. We said the barest outlines of it all,
And our pauses filled with words long forgotten, or never
Spoken. We said what we wanted to be true whether
It was or not, and hung up in the middle of our lives.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Letters from the 'Thirties

NATON LESLIE

"THEY SEEMED TO BE agreeing with him that brand-new pianos certainly were a gas," I read aloud from James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues." I had been talking all evening to a friend who knows jazz, every voice, nuance, and digression, every lead and session player, and who goes to New York City to hear players at Sweet Basil, the Village Vanguard or The Knitting Factory. We had been talking about jazz, coffee making us even more animated, and describing sweet, muffled horns, legends, and the falseness of "saxophone-centered bebop" The conversation had been largely his; he knows jazz much better than I do or ever will.

But we were talking about writing too, and I was trying to show how jazz occurred in well-wrought prose, in those passages which carry some faintly enunciated theme or a bass-line—suggestions rising like bright metal under old paint. So I turned to "Sonny's Blues," reading the part near the end in which Sonny, no longer using heroin, plays piano at one of his old haunts. In the story, Sonny is trying to find a sober way back into the music, to reorient himself to the landscape of the piano, and his friend, the bassist Creole, was leading him, coaxing him into "the deep water." Baldwin's words didn't let me down; they caught that spiral of making jazz. Out-of-context the passage was merely a bit of phrasing, a burst of virtuosity without the rhythmic pacing of the previous pages. Still, when I stopped reading the silence was caesural.

THE PASSAGE LEFT US both promising to read or reread Baldwin's work, and the next evening found me searching my shelves for his books. I had found *Go Tell It on the Mountain* in the paperback bookcase upstairs, and was scanning the hardbacks downstairs, in the high, built-in bookcases in the living-room. What I wanted was *Going to See the Man*, the collection of short stories in which "Sonny's Blues" was published after its 1957 appearance in *The Partisan Review*. I saw his name on a book spine on the top shelf. The ceilings are twelve-foot high in this house, and years ago someone had built a wall of floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. Without a ladder, though, it's hard to get books off the top, so I've learned how to scale the fronts of the shelves, grab a book, and jump back down. Every time I use this clumsy method, I promise to build a library ladder someday soon—like remembering to fix a leaking roof only when it is raining.

So I scrambled up the fronts of the shelves again and, reaching the book, jumped back down with *The Fire Next Time* in hand. As I did, a piece of paper slipped out of the book and landed on the floor ahead of me.

I looked at the book—it contained three long essays, "letters," Baldwin had titled them, and I realized I didn't have any of Baldwin's short stories beyond the two included in a big short-fiction anthology from which I'd read the evening before. Then I picked up the piece of paper, first stuffing it back into the book, then pulling it out again, casually curious about it. I am used to finding things in my books—most came from yard sales, library booksales, flea markets and used bookstores. Often the volumes contain a page of class notes, bookmarks, or other ephemera, but something told me this sheet of paper, the edges folded so it was the same size as a page, would be more interesting. It was a letter:

Hemlock, Ohio
Nov. 23, 1931

Dear Sir,

Will drop you a few lines in Ans to your letter we received last week. We are going to pay you some more of the rent just as soon as we get it. We have been having so much trouble and bad luck. We lost our New Baby this week and had to hire a girl. And the way they are working I don't see where it is coming from. Surley [sic] times will get better pretty soon. We are trying to do our very best.

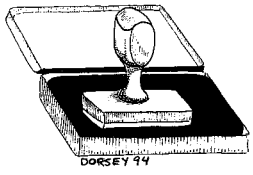
Yours truly,
George Tirner

The frank tragedies of the letter struck me as I sat, smoothing it flat, and rereading it. Loss and pride struggled for space in George Tirner's mind, I imagined, as he held a pencil and carefully formed the words, writing being the least familiar work, as he shaped the letters on wide, school-ruled note paper, using the Peterson script he'd learned in school. He dated it right before Thanksgiving, located himself in Hemlock, and used formal salutations. This brief missive asked not so much for a delay of rent payment as for a dignity in his loss and poverty. At the bottom he found barely enough room for his name, and added it in a cramped hand. Later, though, with a sharper pencil, he retraced the letters to make them crisp, making sure his name read as "Tirner" and not "Turner." He still had his good name. He felt, surely, that this letter to his landlord would permit him to hold his head up, at least for a while. The words "New Baby" are also hard to make out, but Tirner did not retrace them. Some things in the letter did not bear revisiting.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It was the same sense of self-worth which Baldwin had sought, which he tried to give his nephew and namesake in the introductory essay/letter in *The Fire Next Time*. He ended by declaring: "It will be hard, James, but you come from sturdy, peasant stock, men who picked cotton and dammed rivers and built railroads, and, in the teeth of the most terrifying odds, achieved an unassailable and monumental dignity." Only Baldwin had seen, in his too-short life, that dignity was too often challenged and denied. When it momentarily felt reachable, African-American dignity would terribly recede again in the "someday" of spirituals sung in store-front churches. The letter from 1931 was couched in a 1963 first edition—32 years after the social forces unleashed by the Depression. The world of George Tirner and Herbert Hoover had become the marches and movements of the world of James Baldwin and Lyndon Johnson. Like jazz, the letter resurfaced after decades of improvisation and riffs, the original song outlined in its simple lines and words.

The letter is fragile, with splayed creases from refolding. The pencil marks are dim and the paper is browned, blotched by what book-collectors call "foxing." I don't even recall where I acquired the book; maybe it was at the annual West-minster Presbyterian Church booksale, where the suburbanites of Boardman, Ohio, donate books and then buy those of their neighbors. If you arrive early on the first day and get a good spot in line, you can enter the sale with the first wave of buyers, the book dealers and bibliophiles who plunge through the door and with a practiced ease find the most valuable volumes within the first few minutes. Back then I didn't need to arrive early as every book unread was a treasure. I collected books indiscriminately, by author, and probably added *The Fire Next Time* to a stack under my arm; I knew I should read more Baldwin.



Yet more than ten years passed before I chanced to open it for the first time, and finding the letter dated so much earlier, incongruously sheathed in its pages. Another story might suggest itself if I pondered how this letter had been saved, lost but now found, stashed in a book which traveled nearly 400 miles away, in another time, another culture, and finally read, by accident and on a whim, more than sixty years later.

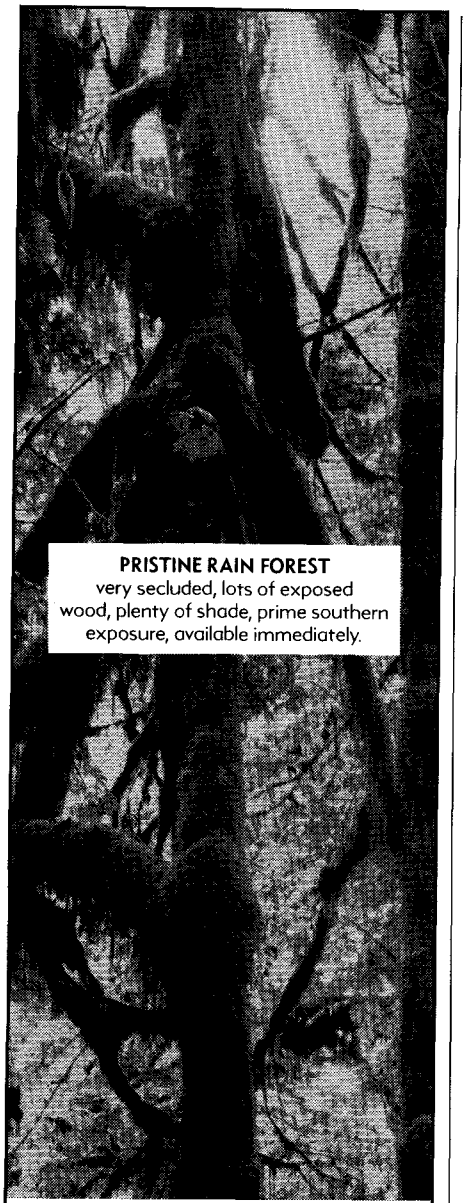
And where was Baldwin in 1931, when George Tirner was pleading his case to the man? He was seven years old, attending Public School 24 in Harlem, coming home to the righteous wrath of his clergyman step-father David Baldwin, and, according to his "Autobiographical Notes," to a mother who "was given to the exasperating and mysterious habit of having babies." "The story of my childhood," he wrote, "is the usual bleak fantasy, and we can dismiss it with the unrestrained observation that I certainly would not consider living it again." Yet at this time he "began plotting novels" and reading, and the forces which would make him a writer, and spawn his discontent and self-imposed exile from the United States, were in place.

His stepfather's work as a preacher, in the Depression-ravished neighborhoods of Harlem, and Baldwin's tutelage in that calling, would have baptized him with the hardships George Tirner notes in his letter, the loss of jobs and the death of babies occurring everyday in the tenement walk-ups. For what the narrator of the story "Previous Condition" sarcastically claimed were "my people," the Depression was a permanent state-of-grace, an involuntary vow of poverty. The promise of Harlem in what are called the Renaissance years of the 1920s had vanished with the factory jobs in this last promised land, the North. Would times get better as George Tirner supposed? Not in the ghetto, Baldwin must have recognized, not with all power and prejudice arrayed against them. As he wrote in an essay, "The Harlem Ghetto," first published in *Commentary* in 1948: "All over Harlem now there is felt the same bitter expectancy with which, in my childhood, we awaited winter: it is coming and it will be hard; there is nothing anyone can do about it" (*The Price of the Ticket*). For his mentor Richard Wright the next promised land was a socialist paradise found after a revolution against the violence of economic deprivation. For Baldwin, though, freedom was a more complicated affair.

The young Baldwin, at 24, believed "the world into which he was born [was] nothing less than a conspiracy against the cultivation of his talent"—a condition he realized he shared with other American writers ("Autobiographical"). But for him the problem was acute. He was an artist in a country of broad shoulders, a lover of language in a family ruled not by words but by The Word. Compounded by being young, black and gay in America, Baldwin's position was untenable. Each of these isolating parts of his personality surfaced in his protagonists: a moody jazz musician in "Sonny's Blues" who joins the army to escape Harlem and heroin, yet cannot get away; the actor in "Previous Condition," who cannot settle upon an identity, or a place to sleep or even belong; or the youth wrestling with religious faith in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. It is no wonder that he "packed [his] bags and went to France"—largely at the bidding of Wright ("Autobiographical").

There he realized that he was "a kind of bastard of the West" ("Autobiographical"). He was part of a literary and artistic tradition rooted in white Europe, yet he could claim no personal part of it. He was trapped in an exquisite dislocation of time, place and race, and soon learned that it was "a gate I had to unlock," before becoming a writer ("Autobiographical"). America, he concluded, would not soon become a place where such a spiritual fusion could be orchestrated; he remained largely outside of the

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED


PRISTINE RAIN FOREST
very secluded, lots of exposed wood, plenty of shade, prime southern exposure, available immediately.
© David Muench 1991

Prime Real Estate. For years, The Nature Conservancy has purchased large tracts of it so that endangered species can flourish there. Now, as partners in the public television series Nature, we're helping provide another place where wildlife can flourish. To learn more about these and all of our activities, call 1-800-628-6860.

NATURE & The Nature Conservancy

Nature appears Sundays on PBS

familiar melodies of country and family for the rest of his life. Baldwin must have felt at times like Sonny did while on heroin: "'[I]t was actually when I was most out of the world, I felt that I was in it, that I was with it.'" Only while in France could Baldwin look at his rage and love for America and declare it his "Previous Condition."

But Hemlock, Ohio, was another kind of nowhere. George Tirner's little town is marked only on the most detailed of maps, and is on tiny route 155 which snakes between the Hocking Hills in what is now the Wayne National Forest in southeastern Ohio, off the main road from Zanesville to Athens, and between Shawnee and Buckingham—the latter being mostly what the locals would call "a wide place in the road." Tirner's words also reflect the local dialect, and unless familiar with that manner of speech, no one would know that the "they" he refers to in "and the way they are working" are coal mines. These little towns were filled with miners and their families, each living in modest houses owned by the company. This was before John L. Lewis and the United Mineworkers, a time of patronizing mine owners, daily tonnage requirements per worker, and company stores. And being a mine worker had always been an on-again-off-again trade, mines closing when coal prices slipped or when a seam played out.

The spotty nature of work would have made George Tirner hold out hope for better times soon, even in the sheer depths of the Depression. He'd seen hard times before, probably then taking a job with the brickyards which also thrived in the area; the only living to be made in the Hocking Hills had to be grubbed out of clay, sod or coal. But in 1931, times would not get better "pretty soon," as the demand for coal had collapsed with the closing of factories in the sooty steel-mill towns which ringed the Great Lakes and dotted the sulfur-stained banks of the Ohio River. Times were so bad the U.S. Treasury didn't even mint the larger denominations of coins, and the unemployed numbered seven million. In fact, times wouldn't get this good again until 1937, when the unemployment level dropped to the same number, down from the 1933 figure of nearly 12 million. Coal mines and textile firms were among the hardest hit, though, and Tirner most certainly would have stopped wondering "where it is coming from" and realize it wouldn't be coming at all.

And what about the man who received the letter in lieu of the rent? Was he behind the counter of the company store when it arrived, or in a big house in nearby Lancaster? Tirner states that his letter answers one he had received, either an overdue or eviction notice. If the landlord owned a number of properties, he probably had been sending many of these notices in 1931. And answers like Tirner's had been as numerous. He couldn't evict them all, with no one working steadily enough to pay rent waiting to move in. A promise to pay was as good as he was going to get, and he kept the letter, I imagine, to produce later as evidence of his patience, if it came to that, to his tenant or to the sheriff. On the back of the letter are columns of numbers being tallied and subtracted.

Eviction or exile, both Baldwin and Tirner were running out of time. By 1943 Baldwin had buried his stepfather and Harlem had exploded in a race riot. In "Notes of a Native Son" the author recalls the confluence of the two events: "On the morning of the third of August we drove my father to the graveyard through a wilderness of smashed plate glass." However, Baldwin would need no greater disaster than his internal crisis. Soon he had written drafts of two novels, each garnering him arts fellowships "but no sale." ("Autobiographical") In between grants he supported himself as a waiter in the Village and as a reviewer of "books about the Negro problem—which, by this time, was only slightly less horrible in print than it was in life" ("Autobiographical"). By then the post-war boom was on, as America retooled its tremendous war industries to produce the cars and appli-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ances now demanded by ration-weary consumers. Times had improved, surely, for the average citizen, as Tirner had predicted (though later rather than sooner), but not for the average African-American. Returning from segregated military units, black veterans found Harlem or Southside Chicago largely untouched by economic recovery. They had G.I. Bill benefits, but most colleges and universities were segregated, and though they had found there was no inequality in foxholes, Jim Crow laws still reigned in the South, as did their de facto equivalents in the North. A nascent civil rights movement had begun, and President Truman had desegregated the military with a presidential decree, but in 1950 such changes were only a nudge against the heavy load of racism the nation still bore proudly. In 1950, Baldwin was too impatient for the times, and too acutely aware of the vicious restraints under which he wrote and lived. So like many postwar youths he hit the road, though this was not a Kerouacian odyssey across the continent. He left the continent. He left the perpetual Depression of the African-American community, and the awful refrains of evangelical bliss and social despair.

So St.-Paul-de-Vence, near Nice, remained his residence, though never his home, for the rest of his life. He always considered himself a "visitor" in Europe, never an "expatriate," and maintained a love for America often expressed in the many essays in which he criticized it. Once, sensing hope and change, he attempted to return permanently during the height of the civil rights struggles of the 1960s, but left again for the high stone walls of his villa in Provence after the murders of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. America would not reclaim its native son so easily. In the last decade of his life he made a few sporadic visits to Bowling Green State University in Ohio. There he would serve as a visiting writer, and return to Europe promptly thereafter; he was a visitor, finally, everywhere. The year after his death I visited Bowling Green to do a poetry reading, and afterwards, in a bar in town, met his lover. He was a lively, engaging man, holding down an entire table of conversation at once, and I imagined Baldwin there too, silent and baleful as in photographs, listening to the improvised conversation but mentally packing his bags.

And what about George Tirner? Even today the mines are gone from the hills of Southeastern Ohio, and the brick streets which sustained the old brickyards have all been black-topped. Like Harlem, when the Depression hit the Appalachian foothills it never loosened its grip. Towns disappeared, families splintered, communities became memories and then were lost altogether to the blown up photographic displays of county historical societies. Tirner, like Baldwin, would have become a traveler, a transient, maybe leaving his wife, if she survived the post-partum illness which had caused them "to hire a girl." He would have moved with the shuffling herds of men on the midnight trains, dodging railroad detectives and raids on their campsite jungles. Maybe he went east to Pittsburgh, finding work in the steel mills which ran full-bore during World War II, moving his family to the North End, or maybe he struck out for Youngstown, Ohio, or Buffalo, New York; the flat lands of the industrial Midwest would soon be festered with the smoke and clamor of war production. Maybe new babies survived and thrived. And was he listening, ten years later, when Franklin Roosevelt declared that all of America was in the fight together, "every man, woman, and child"? He might have then decided to go to war. He might have gone to France.

Surely times got better, James Baldwin, but they haven't improved since the death of those leaders, since the movement made great strides then faltered and splintered. They have gotten better, as you knew they would, hoped they would, watching from France, prodding us with essays. The streets have erupted again and again; violence has met the African-American looking for a birthright and grown inside those who have stopped looking, exactly as your friend Richard Wright had claimed—though the ideology is gone, replaced by the dogma of colors and 'hoods. Harlem has been razed, reborn in urban renewal, and is destined to be razed once more—South Los Angeles and Miami have already burned. And the drugs which plagued Sonny still ravish his daughters and sons, and jazz persists, goes on. Surely it got better, James Baldwin, and didn't. It's like the jazz itself, at last: always the same song, but always different. Creole would say that it's still getting in the water that matters. It doesn't matter when the song is played, or how long, but by whom. The jazz is never really over, it stays in the twisted face of the horn player even after the solo, in the desperate grip of the bass player when his moment on the big fiddle is over. Finding better times, making them, is enough. It doesn't matter where you travel, where you visit. And at the end, like jazz, getting there is finally the most important. □

Works Cited

Baldwin, James. "Autobiographical Notes." *Major Writers of Short Fiction: Stories and Commentaries.* Ed. Ann Charters. Boston: Bedford Books, 1993. 95-98.

——. "The Harlem Ghetto." *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction 1948-1985.* New York: St. Martin's P., 1985. 1-11.

——. "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation." *The Fire Next Time.* New York: The Dial Press, 1963. 17-24.

——. "Notes of a Native Son." *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction* 1948-1985. New York: St. Martin's P., 1985. 127-45.

——. "Previous Condition." *Going to Meet the Man.* New York: The Dial P., 1948. 81-100.

——. "Sonny's Blues." *Going to Meet the Man.* New York: The Dial P., 1948. 101-41.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Visigoths Inside the Gates

PERRY GLASSER

MY BUDDY David Bradley—yes, *that* David Bradley, the PEN Faulkner Award winner for his novel, *The Chaneysville Incident*—knows enough about computers to create a flawless typescript of whatever he writes. Spell checkers, margins, headings—they hold no mystery for David. The guy is happy to click away at his keyboard making art. But as I have a neurotic distrust of anyone who seems content, and as I am particularly disturbed by a writer in that condition, I have told David that to persist in thinking of a computer as no more than an electronic typist is about as sensible as thinking of your Porsche as a mobile shelter from spring rain. A metal tent on wheels will keep you dry, sure, but somehow that isn't the point.

DAVID IS IN MANY matters a traditionalist. Though he has conceded the convenience of computer editing and revision, he is a guy who speaks fondly of the chime on his old typewriter that cheerily announced he had finished yet another line before he threw back the carriage. He does not care spit about the digital culture I warn him will engulf us all. That is, he did not care until this last time he breezed through town and I exposed him to the Internet and the World Wide Web. Talent and achievement don't mean diddley in the land where wire-heads rule.

Enthusiast that I am, up front I will state unequivocally that until the technology matures a bit, accessing the World Wide Web (www.) sucks. There is an unfortunate confusion abroad in the land that persists in maintaining that anything with a screen must afford diversion, but the fact of the matter is that hooking up to the Web, with even the swiftest modem most people can afford, is not nearly as much fun as whittling soap. (There are technological reasons that make the Web tedious. If you care, you can read the text box our ever-flexible editor has set on page 79. If this magazine you hold in your hot little hand were something other than pulped tree treated with acid and marked with toxic inks, you'd hypertextually jump to the data you seek, but we are stuck with the necessity of your plodding through this issue of *The North American Review* in a straight line instead of mucking about in cyberspace with all the linearity of a pinball on amphetamines.)

David is a lot of things, but none of them is a fool, so when I make it plain that the Web is a bore, he wants to know what all the noise is about, and I say that the arrival of the Internet as a medium for the manipulation and delivery of information is the most important technological development in the history of ideas since Gutenberg moved type. It will change the world, I tell him. It is already doing so. About a year ago the number of pages on the Web surpassed the number of pages in the Library of Congress. Robust with color and sound, new pages spring up thick as undergrowth along the Amazon in the days before rain forest incineration became a global sport.

Still, there are maps to the Amazon—most of it, anyway. Wandering the World Wide Web is less like exploring unknown terrain than it is akin to stepping into the Library at Alexandria the day after a strange tribe of fastidious barbarians has removed every volume from every shelf and scattered every page onto a vast marble floor. No page is damaged; no book is intact. Not a factoid is lost; not a theory remains. Everything we want to know is here. None of it is where we expect.

Well, this situation has deconstructionists dancing in the cyber aisles doing the Derrida Polka, for here is nothing less than a medium that delivers all context and sequence to the hands of the viewer. Say we come upon the first page of a novel by James Joyce, read it, and notice that in addition to the familiar words, this material has highlighted bits of text, called links, on certain words such as "Stephen" and "Ireland." We click on the highlights and we are whisked to entire new Web pages with links of their own. Sliding on threads of the Web, we can stray far from Dublin, perhaps to San Francisco where an aging hippie has posted a thorough exegesis of the Grateful Dead lyrics: *Saint Stephen with a rose, in and out of the garden he goes*. We jump from Catholic martyrs to medieval church construction, stone masonry and gargoyles, and while we debate if we can find our way back to Joyce—who'd have loved this free association of words and images, no doubt—we smack into a link about Umberto Eco, the novelist who set a medieval murder mystery in a library that was in fact a labyrinth.

David is delighted by what we see and hear on the Net, but he is a smart guy and knows that having an infinite amount of information available is not as valuable as being able to access what you want to know when you want it. I show him a few search engines, electronic card catalogs that look for key words or phrases on every Web page, a way of sifting through the debris littering the library floor and sorting the chaos. We sit beside each other and coy as

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Bill Gates on an ad campaign I ask, "Where do you want to go today?" and I am unsurprised when David says, "*The Stars My Destination*," which is no less than the title of a 1950s science-fiction novel by Alfred Bester that lately has cult status and holds a special place in David's and my relationship.

(Sigh. Limited by primitive linear expression, your faithful correspondent once again must interrupt his narrative. What would I give for a hyperlink!)

A digression. David and I met when he visited the midwestern university where I had my first job as a professor. In addition to clapping the erasers, the most junior member of the faculty was from time to time dispatched to the airport to pick up arriving luminaries, of which David was one. Once he was settled in a hotel room, with time to kill, we adjourned to the hotel bar where we drank unblended scotch and I had the naïveté to ask what writers had influenced him. David being David, he skipped right over how he'd read Tolstoy in Russian while still in the cradle and as a boy translated Homer for fun, and instead owned up and admitted that once he'd outgrown DC comics, science fiction was the stuff that stirred his young heart and eventually set him to writing. Well, we carried on, because I too had read a metric ton of space operas considered so disposable that one publisher, Ace Books, had put them out two to a volume, printed upside-down relative to each other so that as soon as you finished reading one, you could flip the thing, marvel at a second lurid cover of a Bug Eyed Monster (BEM) whose tentacles wrapped suggestively around a half-disrobed female space traveler, and commence reading yet one more story of rocket jockeys, space pirates, asteroid miners and other future-types. And as it happened, both David and I still admired and recalled with pleasure and awe the invention upon invention that Alfred Bester had packed into a tale of revenge, teleportation, biogenics and the triumph of the common man. We raised our glasses and in unison recited:

> Gully Foyle is my name
> Terra is my nation.
> Deep space is my dwelling place
> The stars my destination.

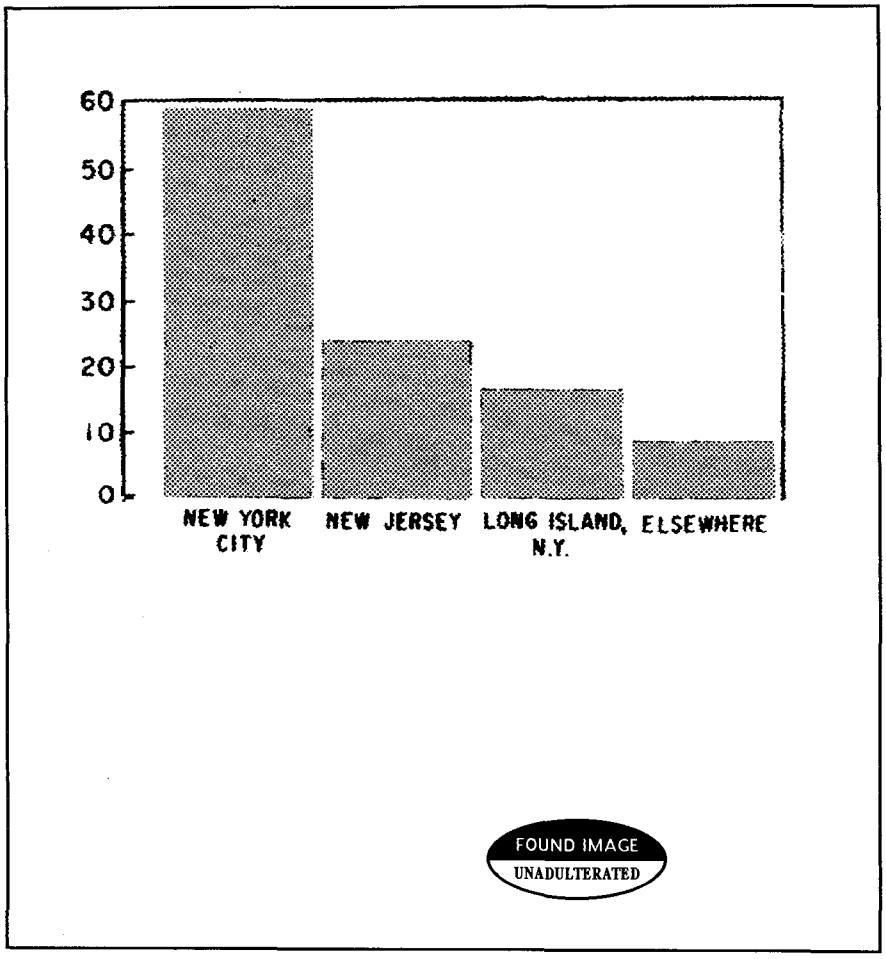
We have been friends since.

So it is with some joy that cruising at Warp 3 in cyberspace we discover a link from the search engine to a page whose author promises an index and criticism of every science fiction novel ever, and while we smile at the immodesty of such a claim, we are delighted at the number of titles already accrued on his page, but we are chagrined to read a plot summary of Bester's novel that seems willfully blind and deliberately perverse in its estimation of the novel's worth.

As do most Web pages, this one offers a chance of instantaneous interactivity, and as David is not one to leave injustice unchallenged, he types a quick, gentle e-mail pointing out the error of the Web page author's ways, namely that he neglects a major plot element that if reëxamined might lead to a different critical judgment of the book.

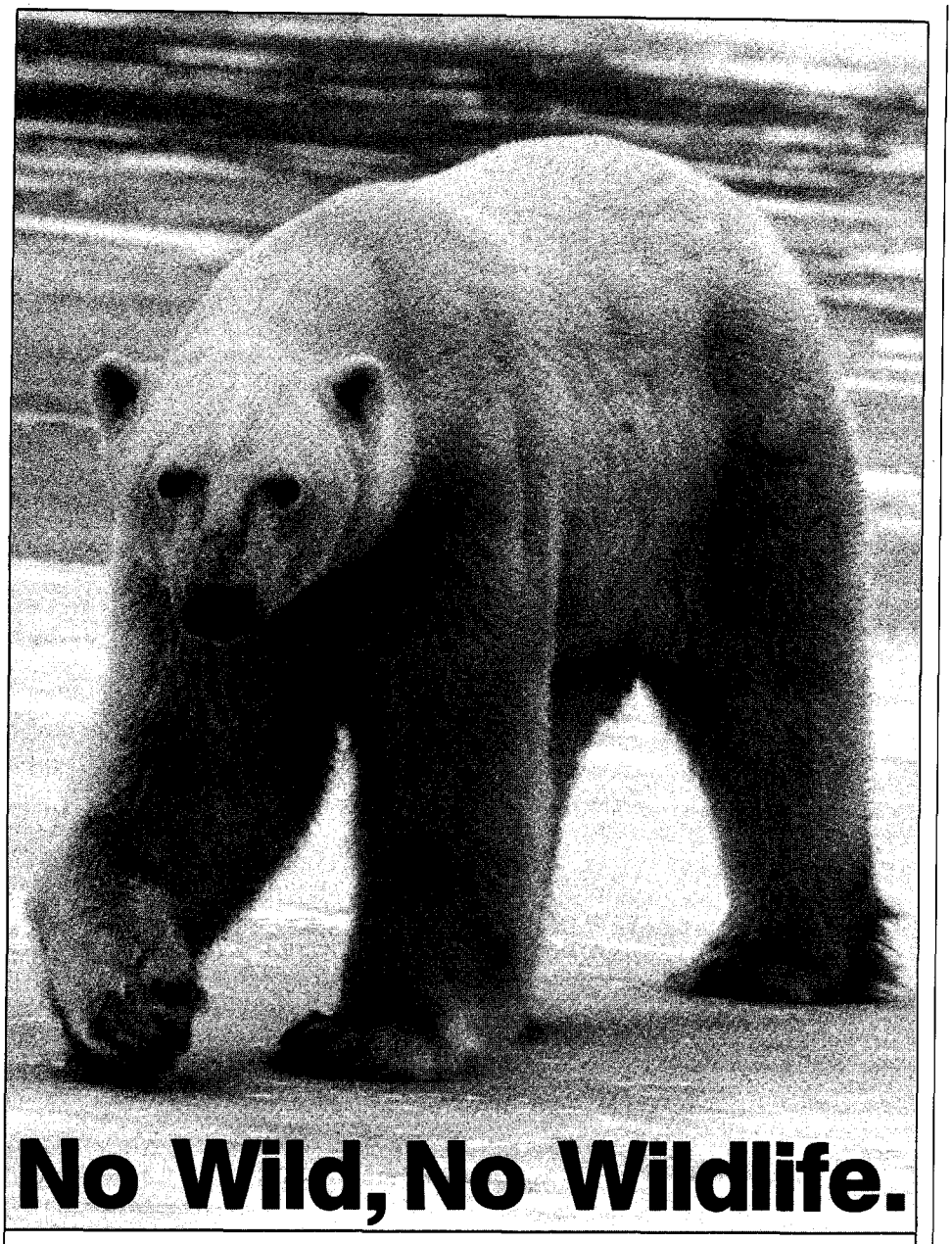
The next day, David goes where David goes, but that very night my computer snatches a scathing reply to his e-mail from the Net. The author is frosted at David's tone, likening him to one of those wretched English teachers who think they know everything and so ruin everything for everybody. This, after all, is *his* Web page, this is *his* opinion, and David, if he is fortunate enough to be double-jointed is invited to perform a sex act with himself that heretofore was only seen in Havana nightclubs in the pre-Castro era. Not only is David's opinion not to be represented on the Web site, but the author promises to return to his web site and lower Alfred Bester's ratings just to be certain no readers ever read Bester's novel again. So there. Pbbthptthtbbb.

Bester's reputation is in no danger, his book having recently been reissued as a trade paperback, but I forward the response to David and brood over the situation. The first



M. KASPER

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



No Wild, No Wildlife.

Polar bears, musk-ox, grizzlies, caribou — more animals than you'd find in Yellowstone — can be found on the magnificent coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge in Alaska. Unfortunately, this portion of our last arctic wilderness has caught the eye of the oil industry. Right now Congress is considering proposals that would allow the oil companies to drill there, even though reports indicate there's less than a one-in-five chance oil would be found.

If we allowed drilling in the region, we would jeopardize the culture of the native Alaskans and untold wildlife, including a herd of 180,000 caribou. Our last arctic wilderness would be despoiled.

The Sierra Club works to save wildlife by saving the wilderness. And we believe, with your help, this arctic wilderness will remain an invaluable refuge.

For information on how you can help:

SIERRA CLUB CENTENNIAL 1892-1992

Sierra Club
85 2nd Street, Second Floor
San Francisco CA 94105
(415) 977-5500

wound bleeds most copiously: We are found out. We *are* English teachers. To erase the stigma, I break my pipes, donate my tweed and corduroy clothing to the Salvation Army and cancel my membership in the MLA so I may never again hear a lecture on Icelandic sagas or engage in spirited debate as to the nature of Ebonics. But there is no avoiding the center of the matter.

David and I are removed from the throne of authority. We are no better than *hoi polloi*. In fact, we are irrelevant to the digital world of critical opinion. We are voiceless, for if ill-educated louts who know little about ideas, critical thought, or *humanitas* have seized control of the means of publishing and distribution, that most dangerous of all human impulses shall destroy what was left of culture.

Democracy is loose on the Web.

Oh, that I could recall every utterance I've carelessly uttered about the free market of ideas. This was not what I had in mind. English professors and grocery bag packers are as one on the Web. Plastic or paper? Do you want fries with my Marxist-Feminist reading of *Moby Dick*?

The situation is not without historical precedent. Holy Mother Church was less than thrilled when vulgar translations of the Bible were first printed, not so much at the possibility of transcription and translation errors, but because with The Word in every hand, interpretation might become general. Widespread literacy risked whole populations giving the raspberry to Rome. Prelates are nailing demands to church doors. English kings are suing for divorce. The next thing you know, peasants are slinging mud at English professors and professional critics—ummm, make that cardinals and bishops.

We are living in a time of great transition. Now, *there's* a rare sentiment.

Someone is sure to point out that the Digital Revolution has a price of admission, the cost of the computer, at least. The cutting edge, they argue, too easily becomes the cut-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Why the Web Is Tedious
or
Stay Away, Watson, I Don't Need You Anymore

Once upon a time, someone who was not Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone, a device designed to turn a human voice into an electrical pulse. All you need is a diaphragm so thin it bends at a force soft as breath. If that diaphragm presses against an electrical conductor, we can call that sucker a microphone, and if at the far end of the transmission a device that reverses the process is present—call it a speaker—we can gossip with Aunt Sally or inform a paramour just when the spouse will be out of town.

The telephone proved so much handier than smoke signals by day or flashing lights by night that soon a mesh—nay, sirrah, call it what it is—a *network* of fine copper tendrils reached into every hotel room, home and office around the globe. In less than a century, we were hardwired.

The series of electrical pulses created by the human voice is an analog of sound waves. Strum a banjo, hit a tuning fork, and you know how the energy of sound looks and feels. You can see sound as electrical waves on an oscilloscope. Put a needle on a rocker arm so sensitive it jiggles at the vibrations of a voice, it can carve grooves into soft wax cylinders or vinyl disks that another needle at another time can read. Next thing you know, you have an industry in Nashville. Oh, the places your voice can go!

Alas, analogs are terribly inefficient; big, bulky, the opportunities for corruption are legion. Even the highest fidelity hi-fi could do nothing if a master recording simply failed when Maria Callas sang Madame Butterfly's final aria. But the good news is that all data—the frequencies of Mickey Mouse's chuckle or the colors in your baby's eyes—can be reduced to code. The code is simple, to be sure, limited to only two digits, 1 and 0, but this is ideal for electricity, which only knows about On and Off, anyway. If you think complicated ideas or images need a more complicated code, think again, because even a simple code can carry a lot of digits when those pulses move at the speed of light. Bits become bytes, and kilobytes mount up to mega and gigabytes, and once we add the technological capabilities made possible by miniaturization, pretty soon we know how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. The answer: all of them, and there's room enough for the entire text of everything Faulkner wrote, too. Code frozen on the surface of a CD can be read by a laser and *voilà*, Berlioz as crisp and clean as a concert hall in your living room. What's more, digital code can be tweaked any time our original is less than perfect, and if there is no original, who cares? We are masters of the digital code! We create digital reality! It's virtually the same. We can set a Tyrannosaurus Rex pursuing a Jeep or have John Wayne sell a beer.

This is the Digital Age.

And this is also why the World Wide Web sucks (though movies are better than ever). Digital sound is just great on your tapedeck and super on your soon-to-be hi-res TV screen, but digital data was never meant to travel through old, sluggish copper wires designed for those big, bulky analog signals. To deliver enough code that digital information arrives smoothly, the code has to be compressed. It has to be bundled. And it has to be turned into pulses of energy analogous to sound. Ugh! Talk about retro! Until technology unjams all that digital data queuing up at a snailish 28,800 kilobytes per second, the Web as it is delivered to most people is slow slow slow. It just *sucks* , man.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Missed Kitty

The wild west is missing more than Marshall Dillon these days. This elusive jaguarundi and other wild cats that once roamed our western ecosystems are now tetering on the brink of extinction. The Nature Conservancy is working here and beyond our borders to safeguard habitat for rare animals and the other living things on which they depend. • Whether it's osprey in New Jersey, mussels in Kentucky, or rain forests in Brazil, The Nature Conservancy protects the lands and waters that rare species need to survive. A world that can sustain its wildlife will be a healthier and happier place for our children and their great grandchildren. Please join us.

Call us at **1-800-628-6860**.
Don't say adios to these amigos.

The Nature Conservancy®

To write: The Nature Conservancy,
Box PSA, 1815 N. Lynn Street, Arlington, VA 22209.

Jaguarundi
Photograph ©1994 Susan Middleton & David Liittschwager
from the book and exhibit *WITNESS: Endangered Species of North America*

ting wedge, and populations already marginal are further sliced away from where the action is. Try not to lose sleep over this hand-wringing and breast-beating. There are those among us who habitually find potential danger in all aspects of change, especially dangers for the disenfranchised among whom, incidentally, they never dwell. These are not the well-off who think everything right now is peachy, but they are professional breast-beaters and hand-wringers, doubtlessly the same who wanted to stop the presses, in some way suspicious that literacy would confuse and damn the poor, based on their observation that those Bibles put out by Gutenberg were not cheap.

In fact, the usual loci of power in our culture, the corporate elite, are far removed from operational literacy for the World Wide Web; for a third, there are not a few organizations dedicated to making public access public policy. Take heart. Who knows more about the Internet, you or the 14-year-old kid up the block whose junior high school has a computer lab? If that's not a sign of impending change, what is? By the way, if the junior high in your town has no computer lab, attend a board meeting. Wear a sign. Talk loud and at length. Pound a lectern. And before you attend, be prepared to learn that your allies this time around are in fact the corporate visionaries who at this unique moment in time have a vested interest in spreading their wealth. It's easy to make jokes about the Evil Empire extending its talons from Redmond, Washington, but in fact Microsoft Corporation is giving away billions to libraries and schools. Apple does it, too. Hi Tech needs a literate worker base and a computer literate consumer market. This unique coincidence of a social concern with a business need doesn't preclude profit, but so what? The alternative is that the priests maintain a lock on the library—a pretty dumb state of affairs if the Visigoths have already breached the walls and begun scattering the books.

Do we really want guys like me and David Bradley forever telling people what books mean? Hell, I went out and reread *The Stars My Destination*, and you know what? No surprise, but it wasn't as good as I remembered. I mean, it was okay, better than the boor who ran the Web site thinks, but as a formative volume that shaped my juvenile writerly mind? Sheesh! No, you don't want to revisit the terrains of your childhood with any expectation of nascent joy.

So sit back and watch the digital revolution! Burn down the library and blow away the ashes. The world turned upside-down is always more fun than a SuperBowl party on a snowy day in Minneapolis. With the power of publication and distribution in the hands of every jamoke who can write HTML (HyperText MarkUp Language), what constitutes literature? Estimates of the number of Internet users range from 20 to 90 million people, figures so divergent that they can only mean that no one knows what they are talking about. But whatever the true number may be, the potential audience for Web publications is a lot bigger than your average literary journal. And that audience is instant. If they can find it.

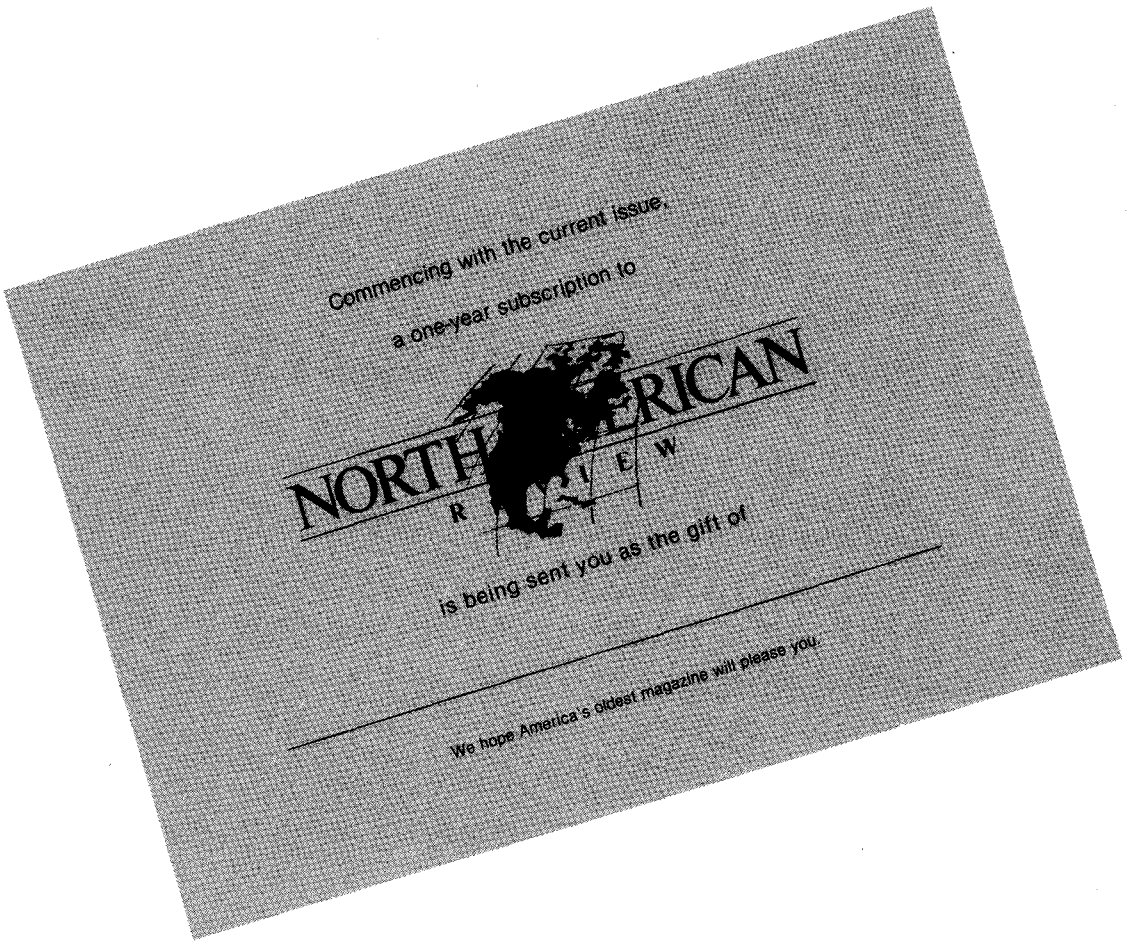
What will all this *sturm und drang* do to the idea of who is a poet? who is a writer? who is an essayist? What does it mean to publish? Who owns a book if no two readers progress through it in the same way? What can we make of interactive archives maintained by self-appointed semi-literate critics? What kind of dictionary is it that lists neologisms and invites readers to offer definitions and is never edited? Is it a good thing that everyone can publish? is it a bad thing?

And what kind of column ends with a series of rhetorical questions?

Actually, the kind that's looking for interactivity. This Virtual View column, not unlike a bad case of athlete's foot, is likely to return. Send me an e-mail. Let me know what you think. Is there anybody out there? □

Contributing Editor Perry Glasser can be reached at *pglasser@tiac.net*

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED


Commencing with the current issue,
a one-year subscription to
NORTH AMERICAN
REVIEW
is being sent you as the gift of
We hope America's oldest magazine will please you.

If they still don't get it...

THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW. SINCE 1815.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Stories by:

Michael Fedo
Sherrie Flick
Mark Halliday
Ken Kalfus
Fred G. Leebron
John Lowry
Hilary Masters
Jeff Minerd
William Penrod
C. L. Rawlins
Ann Townsend
Dallas Wiebe
Liza Wieland

Essays by:

Perry Glasser
Linda K. Kinkel
Naton Leslie
Robert Newton
Richard Terrill

Poems by:

William Virgil Davis
Matthea Harvey
Michael Kopacz
Stephen Perry
Floyd Skloot
Robert Thomas

3109 QUART COMP
QUARTERLY WEST
312 OLPIN UNION
UNIVERSITY OF UTAH
SALT LAKE CITY UT 84112

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED